ALL STORIES NEW

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MARCH

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 160 PAG MA ZINE

STAMPEDE OF OUTCAST MEN

NOVEL OF A TOWN'S POWDERSMOKE REDEMPTION

by **STONE CODY**

TINHORN OUTLAW

by **WALT COBURN**

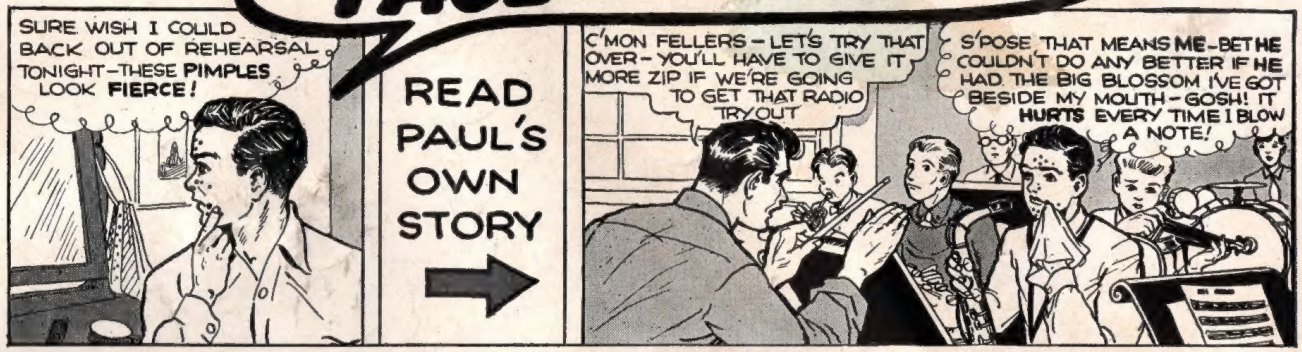
PLUS 4 OTHER NOVELETTES

by **OLMSTED BRAGG SAXON DAVIS**

The TRUE EXPERIENCE of PAUL SHEA

OF SPRINGFIELD, N.J.

I HATE TAKING THIS FACE ANYWHERE!

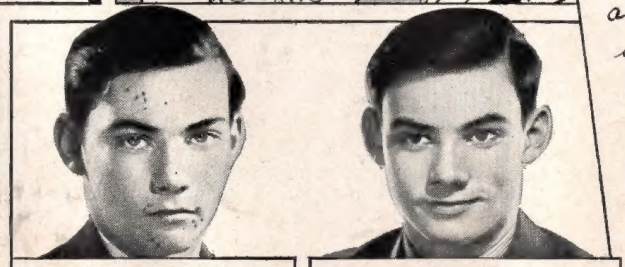

SURE WISH I COULD BACK OUT OF REHEARSAL TONIGHT—THESE PIMPLES LOOK FIERCE!
READ PAUL'S OWN STORY
C'MON FELLERS—LET'S TRY THAT OVER—YOU'LL HAVE TO GIVE IT MORE ZIP IF WE'RE GOING TO GET THAT RADIO TRY OUT
S'POSE THAT MEANS ME—BET HE COULDN'T DO ANY BETTER IF HE HAD THE BIG BLOSSOM I'VE GOT BESIDE MY MOUTH—GOSH! IT HURTS EVERY TIME I BLOW A NOTE!

FOR GOODNESS SAKE PAUL—WHAT'S GOT INTO YOU LATELY—I NEVER KNEW YOU TO SIT AROUND HOME THIS WAY—DON'T YOU FEEL WELL?
OH—I'M ALL RIGHT MUM—ONLY, WELL—A GUY DOESN'T MUCH LIKE GOING AROUND WITH A PIMPLY FACE LIKE THIS!

I WONDER IF FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST WOULDN'T HELP YOU? I'M GOING TO GET YOU SOME—IT'S WHAT A SKIN DOCTOR TOLD LAURA TO EAT—AND SHE SAID IT WAS WONDERFUL
IT SURE IS WONDERFUL IF IT REALLY WORKS

LATER
ALL READY, SON? DAD SAYS HE'LL DRIVE US OVER TO THAT RADIO AUDITION
O.K.—SAY MUM—THOSE YEAST CAKES ARE THE STUFF ALL RIGHT—LOOK—THERE'S NOT A HICKIE LEFT—

PAUL, YOU WERE SWELL—I NEVER HEARD YOU PLAY BETTER
THANKS—I TRIED MY DARNDEST—GEE—I SURE HOPE WE SOUNDED ALL RIGHT IN THAT MIKE
STUDIO



"THE WAY I LOOKED BEFORE I took Fleischmann's Yeast. I hated going anywhere, my face was so broken out."

PAUL NOW—PIMPLES GONE "Fleischmann's Yeast sure cleared up my skin fine," he says.

a fellow feels pretty low about having to go around when his face is all broken out with mean looking pimples. I get so I hated to be seen. That's why I'm mighty glad to tell others about what a swell pimple chaser Fleischmann's Yeast is. Every boy that wants to get rid of pimples ought to eat it.

Paul Shea

Clears up Adolescent Pimples

AFTER the start of adolescence, from about 13 to 25, important glands develop. This disturbs the body. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin and pimples appear.

Fleischmann's Yeast helps clear up pimples by clearing these skin irritants out of the blood. Then—pimples go!

Eat 3 cakes a day—a cake about ½ hour before each meal—plain, or in a little water.

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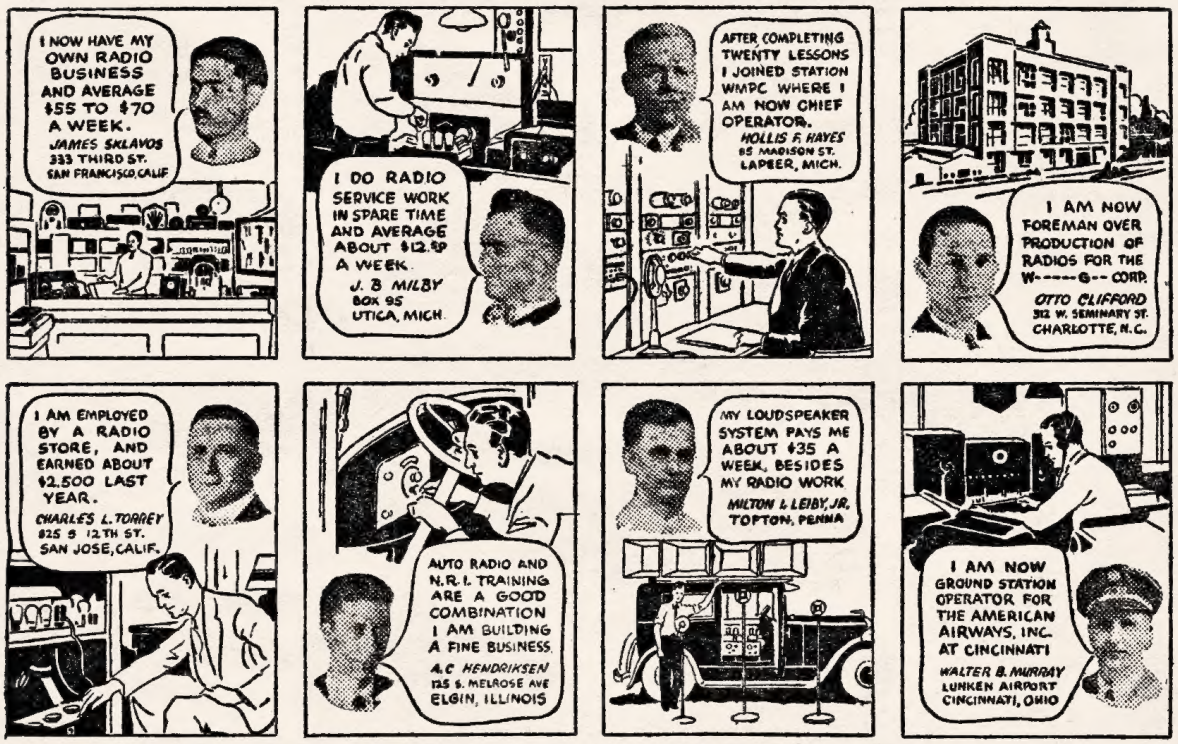
READ THESE *8 True Experiences*
of Men I Trained at Home For RADIO


I NOW HAVE MY OWN RADIO BUSINESS AND AVERAGE $55 TO $70 A WEEK.
JAMES SKLAVOS 333 THIRD ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.
I DO RADIO SERVICE WORK IN SPARE TIME AND AVERAGE ABOUT $12.50 A WEEK.
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I AM NOW FOREMAN OVER PRODUCTION OF RADIOS FOR THE W-----G-- CORP.
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AUTO RADIO AND N.R.I. TRAINING ARE A GOOD COMBINATION I AM BUILDING A FINE BUSINESS.
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MY LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM PAYS ME ABOUT $35 A WEEK, BESIDES MY RADIO WORK
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WALTER B. MURRAY LUNKEN AIRPORT CINCINNATI, OHIO

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FOR A GOOD RADIO JOB

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute

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Do you want to make more money? Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year—full time servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own their own full time or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay and see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, and loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained at home are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Their Spare Time While Learning

Practically every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs that you can cash in on quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money for hundreds of fellows. I send you special equipment which gives you practical Radio experience—shows you how to conduct experiments and build circuits which illustrate important principles used in modern Radio sets. My Free Book tells all about this.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It describes Radio's spare time and full time opportunities, also those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you actual letters from men I have trained, telling what they are doing and earning; tells about my Money Back Agreement. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7CS9
Washington, D. C.

MAIL COUPON NOW

THIS FREE BOOK HAS HELPED HUNDREDS OF MEN MAKE MORE MONEY

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7CS9,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

ALL STORIES NEW

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME ELEVEN | MARCH, 1937 | NUMBER TWO

★ Star Novel ★

STAMPEDE OF OUTCAST MEN.....**By Stone Cody** **10**
Three embittered, outcast gringos, Steve, Solitaire and Doc met in hatred at a roaring border honkatonk. Their partnership was Satan's own triumvirate, for each must redeem the crimson debt of the other—in gunflame, suffering and death!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Star Novelettes ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

TINHORN OUTLAW.....**By Walt Coburn** **54**
Henry Tweed sought to brave the badlands' blizzard gods—and ask desperate sanctuary with the partner of one whom Tweed's own lead had sent to a storm-bound grave!

TWO TOWN TAMERS—ONE TOWN.....**By Harry F. Olmsted** **68**
God-fearing citizens of Smoky Hill swore that their champion, the great Shanghai Hickson, had sold his guns for Judas gold—and bartered their town for slaughter.

THEIR GUARDIAN FROM HELL.....**By Norbert Davis** **96**
A grief-stricken kid by a boothill grave and the brave smile of a range-bred girl welded the broken spirit of Roy Falk—and sent him, willing gun-bait, into a boom-town death-trap!

SHEEPERS SAVVY GUN-TALK.....**By John A. Saxon** **120**
A sheeper, whether man, woman or child, is poison to a cowman like Bart Howell. So even red-headed Sally Moran had to get out, or take that fighting cattleman's hot lead cure!

THE SMOKY RIVER WAR.....**By William A. Bragg** **138**
Blaze McCloud must make one last grim choice: Return to the cold gray walls of the prison he hated—or wage a heartless, bloody war against the only folk in all that war-stricken range he wanted to call friends!

★ ★ Star Short Stories ★ ★

LAWMAN'S BOOTHILL BARGAIN.....**By John G. Pearsol** **43**
The price Sheriff Jim Kincaid must pay for silence was as high as the hangman's noose which awaited him . . .

GUNSLICK'S DEATH PAWN.....**By Edgar L. Cooper** **84**
They played off Waco's own renegade guns against the hard-pressed ranch girl whom he must help—or die!

★ ★ ★ Other Star Features ★ ★ ★

LEGION OF DEATH.....**The Editors** **4**
Killers or not, the courage of those frontier badge-toters stands untarnished. . . .

NESTER'S GUNSMOKE REFORMATION.....**The Maverick** **8**
Old Zoe Naylor swore to bring death to that nester family—forgetting that he, himself, had once been of their own hated breed!

UP THE TRAIL.....**A Department** **147**

Cover Painting by A. Leslie Ross

Story Illustrations by George Wert and Hamilton Greene

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Well of the Padres His Living Tomb

San Diego Reporter, Weak from Loss of Blood, Cheats Death in Ancient Shaft

"For nearly two hundred years this death-trap had awaited its human prey... that was the grisly thought uppermost in my mind, as I fought for life in the ancient crumbling mission well of San Diego de Alcala," writes E. P. Lyle III.

"First, as I was climbing down to explore an opening at the water level, a loose tile struck me on the head; then the rickety ladder slipped, plunged me dazed and bleeding into the water.

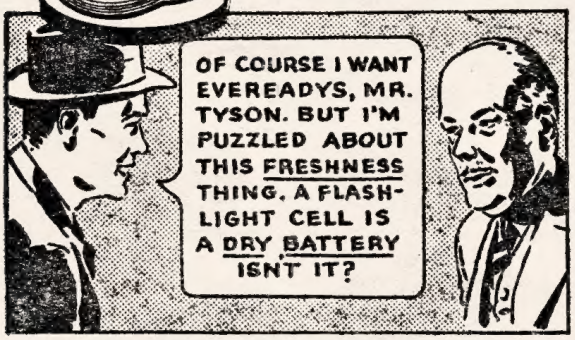
"But I had clung to my flashlight and as the cold water cleared my senses, I could see it shining under the surface. Paddling to keep afloat, I swung the light as best I could around the well. A rusted old pipe attached to the wall offered a hand hold, and was stout enough to hold me as I fought off growing dizziness from loss of blood, and climbed hand over hand to where my companions could reach me.

"They would have pulled a corpse out of that well if it hadn't been for the DATED Eveready batteries in my flashlight—batteries that were really *fresh* when I bought them months before. I would certainly have lost consciousness and drowned before my friends could have reached the mission (a quarter mile away) and returned with rope and a light."

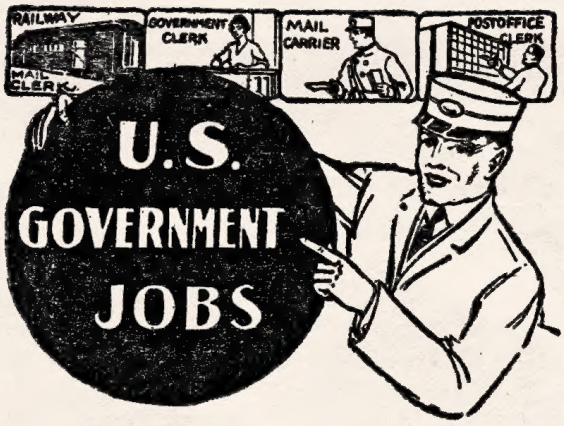
E. P. Lyle

EVEREADY BATTERIES ARE *FRESH* BATTERIES

NATIONAL CARBON CO., INC., 30 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y.



YES, BUT A DRY BATTERY ISN'T DRY. THERE'S A WET MIX INSIDE THAT MAKES IT WORK AS THIS MOISTURE DRIES OUT, THE BATTERY GETS STALE AND ITS LIFE IS SHORTENED AND YOU CAN'T DEPEND ON IT. THAT'S WHY THE EVEREADY DATE-LINE IS SO IMPORTANT



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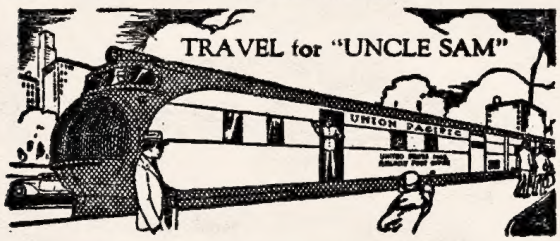
MANY 1937 APPOINTMENTS

MEN, WOMEN

Railway Postal Clerks

Railway Postal Clerks get $1,900 the first year regular, being paid on the first and fifteenth of each month. ($79.17 each pay day.) Their pay is automatically increased yearly to $2,450. Advance may be had to Chief Clerk at $2,700 a year. ($112.50 each pay day.)



3 Days On—3 Days Off—Full Pay

Railway Postal Clerks on long runs usually work 3 days and have 3 days off duty or in the same proportion. During this off duty their pay continues just as though they were working. They travel on a pass when on business. When they grow old, they are retired with a pension.

City Mail Carriers, Post Office Clerks

Clerks and Carriers now get $1,700 the first year on regular and automatically increase $100 a year to $2,100 and $2,300.

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Legion of Death

(A Letter And Our Answer)

To the Editors of *Star Western Magazine*

Sirs:

In reading various fiction stories of the frontier it seems well-nigh incredible to me that so many of the law-officers are made out to be little better than natural killers. Of course, I suppose that in those wild times there were men appointed as deputy officers who were no better than they should be, but it does seem strange that in so many stories the sheriffs or marshals must be painted in such black colors. Surely the majority to hold an elective office of that nature were decent, self-respecting men who would think twice about wantonly taking human life.

Sincerely,
J. K. Whitson,
Providence, R. I.

Dear Mr. Whitson:

While many of the old-time peace officers were by no means "natural killers," at the same time many of them were called on daily to throw in their guns against lawless and desperate men. The better examples of the law-enforcing officers, however, who did so much to make frontier history, were by no means bloodthirsty. And it is an unfortunate fact that at least two great lawmen died because of their reluctance to use a gun when a gun should have been used.

Abilene Tom Smith, the famous marshal who took on the job of cleaning up that town when it was considered as tough as any along the roaring trails, had a mild manner and a courageous distaste for "going to the smoke," as the phrase was. His technique in dealing with the undesirables was simple and effective—up to a certain point. He merely knocked them out with a blow of his fist if they tried to be tougher than he was.

He made a name for himself—but he also made his own grave by that prac-

READ HOW SKINNY GAWKY MEN GAIN 10 TO 25 POUNDS THIS NEW QUICK WAY

Thousands gaining normal hefty pounds—*in just a few weeks!*

SKINNY, friendless men who never could gain an ounce can take new hope from the experience of thousands of others with this new scientific treatment that is sweeping the country. These others have gained 10 to 25 pounds of solid, naturally attractive flesh this new, easy way—*in just a few weeks!*

What is more, this new discovery has given them new pep, energy and popularity for social and business success.

Why it builds up so quickly

Scientists recently discovered that great numbers of people are thin and rundown for the single reason that they do not get enough Vitamin B and iron in their daily food. Without these vital elements you may lack appetite, and not get the most body-building good out of the food you eat.

Now one of the richest known sources of this marvelous Vitamin B is cultured ale yeast. By a new process the finest imported cultured ale yeast is now concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful. Then it is combined with 3 kinds of blood-building iron, pasteurized whole yeast and other valuable ingredients in pleasant little tablets known as Ironized Yeast tablets.

If you, too, need these vital elements to aid in building you up, get these new "7-power" Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today. Note how quickly they increase your appetite, and help you get more benefit from the body-building foods that are so essential. Then, day after day, watch flat chest develop and skinny limbs round out to natural, hefty attractiveness. See better color and natural beauty come to your cheeks. Soon you feel like an entirely new person.

Money-back guarantee

No matter how skinny and rundown you may be from lack of sufficient Vitamin B and iron, try these new Ironized Yeast tablets just a short time. See if they don't aid in building you up in just a few weeks, as they have helped thousands. If not delighted with the benefits of the very first package, money back instantly.

Special FREE offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 843, Atlanta, Ga.

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tice. He was shot down, when a murderer took a Winchester rifle as a long-distance defence against Smith's blow.

Another familiar example of town-tamer courage is that of Bill Tilghman, who knew and worked along the hell-roaring towns when the morning sun shown on many a bullet-riddled body in the streets. Tilghman perhaps was best noted for breaking up the notorious Doolin gang of Oklahoma bandits. Later Tilghman turned to the job of cleaning up some of the oil-field towns, and was shot down when he was trying to arrest a criminal. Tilghman, it is said, did not have a gun in his hand at the time.

However, many a quick-triggered law-officer himself had trouble with the law. Wyatt Earp, famed marshal of old Tombstone and a gunman of great reputation, found himself and his companions driven from the town after the bloody battle at the OK Corral; Wild Bill Hickok's idea was to shoot first—which he usually did —and make his arrest later. His reward was a bullet in the back in a Deadwood saloon as he was engaged in a peaceable poker game. And while Hickok's fame is beyond question, it is also generally believed that he was a cold-blooded killer.

Then there was Henry Plummer, one of the biggest crooks ever to be hung, who for a while wore the sheriff's badge in Bannock, until his career was ended by a group of Vigilantes.

Even in the rough-and-ready days of the frontier, politics and the chance for dishonest gain played their parts in the boom-camp and cattle town, as often they do now in our larger cities. Yet, even though their badges might have been stained, there are few who question the man-to-man courage and physical stamina of these brave and glamorous figures, who must stand as a colorful, dramatic part of the Winning of the West.

Sincerely yours,

—THE EDITORS

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City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

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Nester's Gunsmoke Reformation

FROM the top of Zoe Naylor's bristly tow head down to his big, dusty, run-over boot heels there wasn't a settler in the Los Animas who didn't look up to him as their leader. With the combine of Los Animas ranchers threatening the little two-bit spreads which had recently sprung up on government land, the hard-pressed settlers needed a gent like Zoe.

Zoe Naylor rode out that April night with an unaccustomed worried look in his gray eyes and a strange tightening in his heart, thinking of the wife he had left back at his log shack, and the new-born kid at her side.

Up to the time he'd married, a year ago, he hadn't thought much about the future or what it might hold for him. But the way that Molly turned to him when she was frightened, or that time when she had lung fever, and the way that the button grabbed and wrestled with Zoe's finger just after he was born—well, that somehow seemed to do something to Zoe. He held his big shoulders a little straighter, and there was a certain grim purposefulness about him that seemed to set him apart from other men.

At the little log schoolhouse, Zoe dismounted. Stiffly, he strode inside, through the crowd of roughly-clad men who had received their last warning from the Combine. Crisply he greeted them.

"I'm fighting for all of us," he told them from the little platform. "This is too good land to be scared away from, or be drove off with guns. We're stickin'—an' we'll show the Combine that we can brew up some stronger hell than theirs. My idee is to hit first and hardest. Grab yore guns an' follow me!"

A cavalcade of death, they rode out behind him to make grim rendezvous with those who were trying to wipe them from the valley. Zoe Naylor and his nester army were victorious in driving off the hired gun-hands of the big ranchers, and at last bringing them to the realization that their new neighbors had come to stay.

Zoe Naylor prospered there in the valley he had fought for. Ever in his mind was the thought that he increase his holdings for the now growing family of boys, and for Molly. As the years went on, he found that not only his family was depending on his keen judgment but also were the old-time ranchers whom once he had met in such grim conflict. Zoe Naylor, at forty-five, was a cattle baron in his own right, a benevolent despot, managing a range which took a rider more than a day to cross.

They said that Zoe Naylor's hair turned white that night when he looked on the body of his wife, after the doc had left and his medicines had availed nothing. Zoe and the boys—five strong youngsters, perhaps too much like himself—built with their own hands the coffin and dug the little grave under the willows down by the creek.

After that, Zoe paid less attention to his physical possessions, seeking to transfer to his sons that same ambitious fire which even then seemed to be waning within him. But the wisdom with which he had often attended the wants of his neighbors seemed now to be lacking. At last, one by one, the sons left for new ranges, claiming that they were too old to be ridden herd on; that Zoe himself was a stove-up old war-horse who had grown too crotchey with the years to be of any human use. And the time came when Zoe Naylor sat in his chair by the fire, alone in the big house, looking at the gnarled hands which had won for him a rangeland empire, and cursed the fate which seemed to have taken away from him the things which lent all meaning to his life.

The still-remembered winter of '87 came, and with it the Big Die. Zoe's range went to pay his obligations; the few head of stock he had left went the same way.

Zoe moved back to the shack of rough-hewn logs which he had first occupied, in the days of his vigor. Bitterness roweled him; he had built

up something great for those who were to come after him, only to find himself deserted and alone, his hard-won range gone.

Yet he was still the fighter. He managed to secure a few hundred acres of fair grazing land. After a fashion, he made them pay, enough to supply himself with tobacco and grub. And always, at the close of day, he would sit before his shack, his faded eyes peering into the sunset, perhaps hoping for a return of someone who, once more, could see in him the answer to some human need—if it be only companionship.

Then it was that he made out a rattletrap wagon, drawn by a sorry-looking crowbait nag, coming toward him. A bunch of dirty-faced kids looked out through the jagged rents in the canvas top. A scrawny-appearing woman held the reins; a white-faced, stubble-whiskered man sat weakly beside her. At once, a wave of antagonism swept through Zoe Naylor.

Nesters! He knew well the breed, and forgetting that he himself had borne that stigma, he frowned up at them, telling them to go on.

"We're settlin' here, neighbor," said the woman, waving a paper at him. "Bettin' starvation agin' Uncle Sam that we can tough it out till we prove up. This has gone back to public domain, in case yuh don't know. An' looks like there's room for us all. We won't crowd yuh none."

Zoe Naylor swore. These were not the thrifty, hard-working small ranchers he had once led to victory. He shrugged, and went back inside the house, glancing toward his old six-shooter. He'd wait, give them one chance. and then. . . .

The chance came when old Zoe Naylor found traces of a butchered steer, the choice steaks cut off and its carcass skinned. Grimly, with the fire of battle smouldering in his old eyes, he buckled on his gun and rode over to the newcomer's shack. The evidence was complete when he found the hide, bearing his brand, buried under the loose earth of the nester's barn.

"Come out a-shootin', Nester-man," came his cracked voice, "or I'll come in an' get you!" And with his gun in his hand, he stepped inside.

The nester was lying down, his irregular breathing telling of his illness. The wife stood there, stark terror in her eyes, her hand to her lips, and with her small brood of children clustered about her skirts, staring at Zoe. Then one of the children, a mite of a thing, ran over to him, and placed her small hand trustingly in his.

A bitter grin twisted Zoe Naylor's lips as his gun dropped. "I never killed a sick man when I could help it," he muttered. "Reckon I'll get you well before you decorate a cottonwood limb."

He stayed there, and nursed back to health the man he had come to kill. And while he was doing that, it seemed only natural to him that he would feed and take care of the man's family.

"You don't strike me as either cottonwood fruit, nor yet a good farmer," said Zoe to the nester. Mebbeso we can make a cowhand out of you. I'll let you work out that killed beef, but you got to straighten up an' get some gumption in you. You got a wife an' a bunch of kids to take care of. . . ."

But it wasn't the ex-nester who took care of them. It was old Zoe himself, who had found once more the responsibility that he was almost hopeless without. Planning by night, working range by day, Zoe Naylor won back some of the wealth which had been his. And when the four kids ran to meet him, and when the new, awkward cowhand, with a look of new-found manhood in his eyes, asked Zoe for advice, Zoe Naylor knew that he had found about everything he wanted.

Zoe Naylor lies buried alongside the little willow-bordered stream, near another well-tended grave. And nearby, in a comfortable ranch house, the man who started life as a down-at-heel dirt farmer has a good ranch, well stocked with sleek cattle. Looking into the twilight, he and his wife give silent thanks for the white-bearded oldster who seemed to have renewed life after a pair of small hands reached up to his, to find a way into the golden promise of the future.

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OUTCAST MEN •

STEVE CALVERT stood at the bar of Solitaire Varnum's border honk-atonk and felt the rotgut whiskey burn his throat without bringing any glow to the cold nerves which hummed inside him. A wedge-shaped, bitter-mouthed youngster, his tawny eyes were like those of a great cat, with a faint, deadly fire sleeping in them.

Contemptuously, he took in the place—a big, clay-floored room, irregularly shaped, with the bar occupying an angle at the side, gambling tables opposite, and in the center a dance-floor, where painted

girls in short flounced skirts whirled with the tough clientele. His sweeping gaze encountered El Tiburon's shark-like face, caught a cruel, mocking glint in the bandit leader's eyes as they met his own.

That look sent a thrill of warning through nerves already keyed to danger. For only two weeks Steve Calvert had been a member of El Tiburon's gang. He had joined up with the Mexican renegade because he had recklessly decided he had nothing further to live for, and wanted to end his life in sudden gunflame. El Tiburon's hell-for-leather border cattle running seemed to offer a better chance than most.

For three years now Steve had followed the dim trails. A hunted outcast, accused of a crime worse than murder, the hot, strong life in him had turned gradually to a bitterness so deep that the idea of death had come to seem to him a boon.

Yet the realization had grown on Steve Calvert that the kind of death El Tiburon's work offered was not the kind he wanted. The Mex *bandido* had the conscience of a wolverine. His raids were ruthless, daring, but so carelessly planned that they usually ended in gunplay—which cost the life of cowboy or rancher—some hombre maybe with a family and kids, or some decent lawman who didn't have a chance against the renegade bunch, but who gave his life without question for what he believed to be his duty. So far, Steve hadn't had any personal hand in such a killing, and he knew now that he didn't ever want to have. He wanted to go out some cleaner way. . . . So he had made up his mind to quit the gang.

That, he knew, wasn't a particularly healthy thing to decide. In fact it was almost the closest thing to suicide he could have chosen. No man, it was said, had ever quit El Tiburon—and lived. And he guessed, his own eyes stabbing coolly into the Mexican's, that El Tiburon suspected his purpose. He had not been able to keep his hostility and his contempt under cover these last few days. And Rafael Sanchez, who was called El Tiburon del Rio—the River Shark—was no fool.

He was smiling his shark-toothed smile at Steve now, but above the smile his eyes were freighted with death. Steve grinned back at him mockingly. The Mex couldn't very well know that he'd be doing Steve a favor. He couldn't know that Steve Calvert wanted to die, but to die fighting in a decent cause.

Yet underneath his grin he felt a kind of hard anger boil up in him. He didn't like anything about El Tiburon, or the killer scum who rode with him. He didn't like this damned border dive or that granite-faced tinhorn, Solitaire Varnum, who ran it. Maybe he'd better start things himself. . . .

A curse from the dance-floor interrupted his thoughts. There was the sound of a blow and the Mex orchestra broke off in the middle of a tune. The crowd split and Steve saw Yaqui Pete, El Tiburon's segundo, standing there facing a smaller man who swayed drunkenly. The smaller man was called Doc Henley, the only other American member of the bunch. He looked a little dazed now, staring into the cruel, slitted eyes of the breed, the eyes which seemed to mock and threaten all men—except the bandit boss.

Steve's lips lifted. There wasn't anything about Doc Henley that he liked, either. An American, a white man, who'd run with a coyote pack like El Tiburon's. . . . During his two weeks with El Tiburon he had had a couple of run-ins with Henley—sharp little flare-ups which might have ended in gunsmoke except for Steve's contempt for this gone-to-seed renegade who was mostly too drunk to know what it was all about.

Now Henley was about to get the licking he needed. Maybeso he'd be killed, merely to furnish the Yaqui with the

sport he desired. It had nothing to do with Steve. But then, as Steve watched, Doc Henley seemed to recover from the momentary daze which had held him. He tore into the Yaqui breed with both fists, and Steve felt his blood stir despite himself. The middle-aged, whiskey-sodden American had as much chance against the Yaqui as a terrier against a lobo killer, but, by God, he had guts, after all!

THE Yaqui took a right and left to the mouth, swearing gutturally, and then smashed the American to the floor with a pile-driver right. Standing near the little man, the Yaqui's eyes went suddenly murderous. His hand moved to the gaudy sash around his middle and came out with the flashing glitter of a bare blade. Slowly, he took a pace toward Henley, like a cat stalking, the knife held, blade-foremost at his hip. His purpose was unmistakable. Sudden silence held the crowd. The eyes of El Tiburon's men were intent, waiting for the kill.

Steve Calvert's muscles exploded under him. As he moved, he knew with wonder, why he was doing so. This Henley, whatever else he was—or had been—was a fellow countryman. No matter what he'd done, he couldn't be left to be murdered by a slant-eyed Yaqui breed, while Steve looked on.

Without thought, Steve Calvert's muscles slammed into action. He was half across the floor before full knowledge of the futility of the attempt was on him. El Tiburon's pack would be all over him the minute he was finished with the breed. But to hell with that! He wasn't going to let that knife. . . .

His left hand caught the big segundo's throat, yanking him backward. His right slammed down the wrist of the knife hand. He twisted, with all the force of steel and whipcord muscles behind that move. The knife dropped to the floor. Steve kicked it aside and stepped back.

The breed had whirled, crouching, his face a snarling mask of hate. About him, Steve could feel El Tiburon's pack close in, narrowed eyes waiting, hands near the hilts of knives or low-belted Colts. He scarcely spared them a glance. Instinctively he knew that they would wait before closing in to see the outcome of his quarrel with the Yaqui.

The breed drove in. His big arms were up, protecting his face, and Steve's smashing, power-driven right stopped him but did not do the damage it seemed to do. The force of the blow and the colli-

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sion knocked the Yaqui sidewise, reeling. He fought for footing, and then went down, half a dozen yards from Steve.

His hand flashed to his shirt, came out freighted with a short-barreled stingy gun. Steve tensed, his hand lashing toward his own gun, but he was too late. The Colt roared, smashing the tense silence of the room into thunderous fragments. Something seared Steve's ribs, like the swift stab of a hot poker. He knew he had been creased, that the breed had been betrayed by his own treachery—had wanted so hard not to give Steve a chance that he had shot too fast and missed. Then his own gun bucked once against his palm.

The big breed stiffened like a stung snake, writhed, trying to thumb back the hammer of his gun, and went limp.

Steve whirled to face the room, as a dozen hands lashed toward knives or guns. He was done for, and he knew it, but he was going to take some scum to hell on the same chute.

Then a voice ripped out, sudden and deadly. "Put up that gun, Sanchez. Tell yore men not to shoot. The first Mex that pulls a trigger is goin' to send a slug into yore own guts."

Steve's head jerked in involuntary surprise. His swiveling eyes picked out the speaker—the rock-faced tinhorn, Solitaire Varnum. Varnum was on his feet, slate gray eyes blazing, a silver mounted .45 in one hand, a wicked-looking derringer in the other.

He was to one side of El Tiburon and he had the drop on the Mexican, who had frozen, gun in hand, his wicked face pivoted toward the gambler as though it had been jerked by a string. About the room, half a dozen guns were out, or halfway out of leather.

For a long moment—for the space of two breathless heart-beats—there was absolute and motionless silence. During that moment, a word, a movement, the flick of an eye-lash might have loosed the flaming death.

Solitaire Varnum ripped out savagely, "Start the ball, an' I'll blow half a dozen of you to hell, back along with this coyote that calls himself the Shark of the River. Call the play, buzzard-meat, or else leather yore irons!"

IN HIS black suit, topped by his sandy, graying head and blazing eyes under the thick, ruddy brows, he made a formidable figure. Another man—a weaker or smaller or less fearless man—might have failed. But even Steve, with the back of his mouth dry and the incredible weakness of relief in his knees, could understand why El Tiburon straightened slowly and shoved his gun back into his holster, and why his sullenly muttering followers did likewise. It was not the guns in Solitaire Varnum's hands as much as the power of the man's personality. Unleashed as now, that power was like a dazing physical blow.

The gambler saw the guns go back into leather with his hard mouth contemptuous. "Roll yore spurs out of here," he roared. "By God, I don't know how I've put up with yore skunk smell so long."

El Tiburon's rat's face was venomous.

"You'll pay for this, gringo dog," he spat in Mexican. "The time will come when I cut your heart out and feed it to the pigs."

The tinhorn's eyes were suddenly frozen. "Git," he said briefly.

And the Mexican got. Steve knew suddenly that El Tiburon had been close to death, in that instant, and that El Tiburon had known it.

Reaction flooded over him. It came to him suddenly that he had been scared—scared, in spite of himself, by the death which had grazed him with swift, bright wings. That dryness in his throat, that sudden slackening of his knee muscles had

betrayed it. And temper followed the fear, as it is apt to do in brave men.

He stared blackly at Solitaire Varnum. Something about the man had set his hackles rising all along. Now, he supposed, the tinhorn would expect him to be grateful to him for saving his life. To hell with him!

The gambler had taken his place at the poker table again. He was riffling the cards, paying no attention to Steve nor to Doc Henley, who had staggered to his feet now.

Steve Calvert drew a long breath and strolled over to the poker table.

"I reckon I'm supposed to be obliged to yuh," he said challengingly to the tinhorn.

Varnum looked up, his eyes narrowed, estimating.

Steve took a silver dollar from his pocket and tossed it deliberately on the table. "This'll about square it," he said. "Yuh might even give me six bits change."

The gambler's cold eyes stabbed at Steve sardonically.

"Yuh don't set the value of yore life very high," he commented easily.

"High enough," Steve said. "I don't exactly figger why yuh horned in on my grief, but whatever yore reason was, yuh called the wrong play."

"An' how-come yuh figure I had some special reason for backin' yore hand?"

"Like this, tinhorn—I've heard plenty about yuh, but I never heard yet that yuh done anythin' without tryin' to collect yore's out of it."

Solitaire Varnum stared at him a long moment, then he threw back his big head and laughed silently.

"Call it that if you want," he acknowledged ironically. "Mebbe I figgered to use yuh on a little job I got in mind."

"I'm not needin' any," Steve said coldly.

Varnum got up from the table. "If yuh're the rooster I think yuh are, yuh'll like this one," he said. "Come into the back room an' I'll tell yuh about it."

Doc Henley was in Varnum's path, standing a little unsteadily. He had been following the passage between the two with a puzzled frown on his face. Varnum caught him by the arm and turned him about. "You come, too," he said amiably.

Steve stood still, staring after them. For a moment it was in his mind to turn and walk out. The sheer insolence of the gambler's assuming that he would obey riled him. Then he found himself walking toward the back room, not quite knowing why he was doing it, but telling himself that he'd call whatever hand this tinhorn held.

CHAPTER TWO

Into the Death Trap

WHEN they were seated around a table in the back room, the gambler looked sharply at Steve and shot out, "How'd yuh like to get back at that gang of dope-runners."

Steve Calvert stiffened. "Dope runners?" he demanded harshly.

Varnum's eyes were mocking. "Yuh ain't goin' to tell me yuh didn't know you was runnin' dope?" he prodded.

Calvert's chair clattered on the floor behind him. He was on his feet, his hand clawing toward his holstered gun.

"Yuh lie!" he ripped out, white-lipped. "Yuh can't try to hang that on me. By God, I'll send any man to hell for sayin' I ran dope! Do yuh hear me? Yuh lie!"

He was making fight talk now and knew it, but the result was not what he thought it would be. The gambler's face did not change. Only his eyes glinted strangely, perhaps with a momentary flash of triumph.

"Don't git on the prod," he said with a wry smile. "Mebbe I was wrong to make out like I believed yuh was in it, but I

had to know. Now, listen: Sanchez is smart. I been hunchin' that he's kept this dope business under cover even from his own gang. He makes a show of runnin' wet cattle, but that's only a cover for his real game. He splits the cattle money with his bunch, keepin' the real dinero for himself."

Steve's eyes ripped at him as he spoke, but doubt was creeping in to tone down the first red anger that was in him. He was beginning to remember certain things. Suddenly he whirled on Doc Henley. "What do you know about this?" he rasped.

Henley shook his head. "They let me into the gang some time back because they found out that—that I knew something about medicine. One of the gang had been shot. I—I tried to help with that man, but I told Sanchez that I couldn't doctor. Since then, I guess they've just been looking for a chance to get rid of me. They never let me know anything of their plans."

Steve turned back to Varnum, his eyes still hard. "I don't know if yuh're lyin' or not," he said, "but go ahead. I'm listenin'."

Varnum leaned forward and talked, but at first Steve Calvert scarcely heard him.

Dope! The very word was like a red flag to him. The mere thought of it was nauseating and bitter—as bitter as the black, hopeless hell through which he had wandered for three long years.

His mind went back to the time when he was young Steve Varnum, with a spread of his own, and friends, and a girl —a girl he no longer dared think of. Sometimes, despite all his will, the vision of her face came to him—the curled, short upper lip, the deep brown eyes which seemed somehow to hold enough faith and loyalty and love to drag a man back from the deepest pit in hell. When that happened, the acid sting of memory ripped him wide open, left him filled with pain which made him temporarily a madman. For the faith in that girl's eyes was a lie, just as the promise of loyalty in his friend's eyes was a lie. And just as the promise of life itself was a lie!

No man in Los Santos had been more respected or better liked than young Steve Calvert—until the day he had tried to help a friend. Bud Dawson had been even closer to Steve, in a way, than Betty Cranston had been. They had been saddle partners since they were kids, had shared good times and bad. They were partners in their spread, and inseparable. Then Bud had gotten strange. At first Steve didn't know what to make of it. The kid looked sick and someway he had gone loco. He wouldn't talk to Steve, wouldn't work, and disappeared mysteriously for days at a time. When he came back, he was nervous, jumpy, half out of his head.

In the end, Steve began to suspect the cause. Bud was taking dope.

Heartsick, he pretended to play along, began, skilfully, to work his way back into the kid's confidence. The day came when he got Bud to promise to take him along the next time he went to town. With him, Steve went into a back-street dive where the stuff was distributed. If he could get to the bottom of the thing, trap the people who sold it, he figured he might save Bud.

Together, they had a drink, waiting for the man to show up who would sell them the stuff. . . .

And the next thing Steve Calvert knew, he was in jail, charged with being the head of the dope peddling ring—and with the murder of Bud Dawson!

WHEN grizzled Sheriff Bill Edwards told him that, Steve lost his head and actually tried to get at the sheriff through the bars, to kill him with his bare hands. Followed hours of maddened pacing up and down while what Bill Edwards had told him burned into his mind and tortured his soul. He had been caught by

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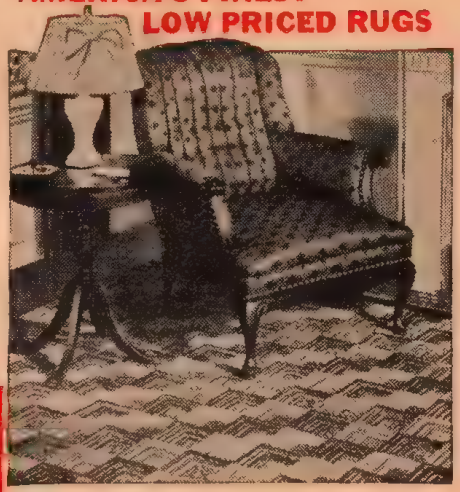

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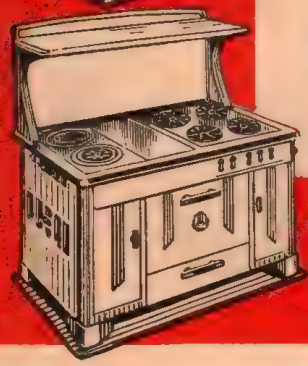

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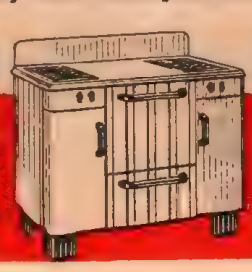

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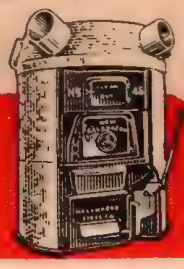

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a United States deputy marshal with dope secreted on his person. Bud Dawson was dead in the backroom of the saloon, killed by Steve's own gun. The case was complete and damning. Steve himself had been found half-drunk, with a bruise on his forehead which evidently had been sustained in a fight with Bud, who had been unarmed. It was evident that the two had quarreled over the dope—Doc Harbison, at the inquest, had declared Bud under the influence of cocaine before his death—and Steve had killed his partner, who apparently had known too much about his dope-running activities.

Steve remembered the drink he had had with Bud. He knew now that the liquor must have contained knockout drops—the kind of knockout drops which rob him of his consciousness while still allowing him to walk about. The real leader of the dope ring must have suspected that Bud had talked too much to Steve. They had killed Bud, and framed Steve so that he would walk into a death trap.

But that was a truth that Steve alone knew, or rather, shrewdly guessed at. He didn't even know the identity of the men who had framed him. He had heard it rumored that Murch Caton, who ran the town's principal saloon and who was becoming a power in the county, was connected in some way with this particular dive, but he was not even sure of that. The place was ostensibly run by a Mexican, who had disappeared right after the killing.

Steve swore to himself that somehow he would get the deadwood on the men who had murdered Bud and framed him. His own reputation in the little border cattle town was high. Somehow he would be believed. He had plenty of friends.

He kept waiting for those friends to come to see him in jail. But nobody came. He kept waiting for Betty Cranston to come. But Betty did not come either. And the bitterness of that began to eat into him as not even the frame-up itself had done.

Incredulous even of the stark fact that his friends' loyalty was gone, he kept waiting for Betty, for his friends. And then finally his "friends" came—in the form of a hang mob. Steve heard the voice of that mob outside the jail. He heard it roar for his death. A voice shouted that he was worse than Jim Gunness, and the mob roared menacing agreement. Jim Gunness! Then it was that Steve threw back his head and laughed aloud. And with that laugh young Steve Calvert died. In his place was another man, hard-mouthed, bitter, whose faith in life and men was gone.

Steve Calvert had held the world by the tail on a down-hill pull. He had everything—youth, ambition, a fine, growing spread, and a girl any man might have been proud of. Now, suddenly and unbelievably, Steve Calvert had nothing left—only despair, the contempt of his fellows, and the dread shadow of the noose about his neck.

Worse than Jim Gunness! Ever since he had come to Los Santos, Steve had heard that name used as a synonym for the worst kind of skunk a man could be. For Jim Gunness had started the dope traffic in Hardwood. Using a fine reputation as a shield, he had set out to murder men's souls for a dirty dollar—to betray his friends' trust in him for greed.

Jim Gunness had been found out, and had left the town a jump ahead of a lynch mob. His name was anathema. And now they were comparing Steve Calvert to Jim Gunness!

Nothing counted after that. It didn't make any impression on him when Bill Edwards appeared and turned him loose. Edwards had said that he doubted Steve's guilt, but Steve, in his newly found bitterness, preferred to believe that old Edwards was just afraid of having the mob take his prisoner away from him.

Steve Calvert rode away from that town, with the black hell of that one night and day seared forever in his heart. He rode out into the lonely night trails, with every man's hand against him, hunted and hopeless, with his world pulled down around him. It might have broken a weaker man, as in a sense, it had broken Steve Calvert—had turned him into a reckless, desperate rider among the legion of the damned, lost to everything but his own private sense of decency.

All that was weaving again in the back of his mind as he listened to the tinhorn, Solitaire Varnum.

". . . he's bound to have the money cached in his hide-out there," Varnum ended. "Let's go an' get it. Accordin' to the talk of that drunk Mex, there must be as much as twenty thousand dollars. Takin' it will break El Tiburon like nothin' else would. Money's his god. More than that, he needs it to keep on. He's got to keep right with the local Mex government. If he can't pay, it'll make him a hunted renegade in his own country as well as in this. It'll put him in hell. Besides, there's the money—twenty thousand ain't to be sneezed at."

Steve's voice grated. "To hell with the money! If yuh want me to throw in with yuh, I'll do it. But I won't touch his dirty dinero. I'd do anythin' to get back at a snake that runs dope. Listen . . ."

Eyes narrowed, teeth clenched he told the gambler something of what had happened to him, of the reason for his hatred of dope. Solitaire listened with his face a hard mask until Steve mentioned the name of Gunness.

The gambler was on his feet then, eyes half insane. "What's that?" he rasped. "Jim Gunness?" The snouty, huge-bored derringer flashed into his big hand.

"What do you know about Jim Gunness?" Steve snapped.

The insanity slowly went out of the gambler's eyes. He put his gun away and with an abrupt movement sat down again. "Never mind that," he said curtly. For a moment he was silent, his bleak face impassive. "You know Sanchez's hide-out," he said again to Steve. "Where'd he be likely to cache the money?"

Steve's eyes narrowed. After a moment, his lips stirred, on the verge of speech, then closed again. Whatever was in the name of Jim Gunness to sting Solitaire into momentary madness, it was no use to question him. That was written plainly enough on the tinhorn's bleak features.

"There's a crippled Mex, named Juan, who lives in the shack that El Tiburon sleeps in," Steve said slowly. "He never quits it, an' he looks at Sanchez like he thought he was the Almighty. I've thought it was kind of queer. Mebbe that's where he keeps his dinero."

Varnum's eyes gleamed. "Sounds like it to me," he clipped. "Well—do we ride?"

Steve got to his feet. "It can't be too soon for me."

Doc Henley cut in. He was sober now, and obviously shaky. His eyes looked scared. "You—you can't do that. Maybe Sanchez an' his men will be already back there. You—you wouldn't have a chance."

Steve turned on his heel contemptuously. "Stay here then," he snapped.

But Solitaire Varnum was not satisfied. He tried to urge Doc to come. That was funny, Steve thought. What did the tinhorn see in this drunk to make him want to take him along? In fact, there was something queer about the whole layout. Why did Solitaire himself want to take such a risk? He had money enough, and he hadn't Steve's motive of wanting to die.

He swung on the gambler. "Just what the hell is your interest in El Tiburon?" he shot out, eyes narrow, hard.

The gambler lifted his heavy shoulders. "Let it go that I just don't like the sidewinder," he said indifferently.

For a moment, Steve continued to look

at him, then he said impatiently, "An' I don't like you, tinhorn—but I ain't out after yore hide, even so. Are yuh comin' or are yuh stayin' here blowin' off your mouth?"

Varnum's face turned brick red, but after a moment's hesitation, he said, "Let's go, hombre!" And he said nothing more as they went out, leaving Doc Henley staring at them pale-faced and somehow wistful.

They had only been riding for two hours when they heard the hoofs of a galloping horse behind them. They pulled off to the side of the trail, hands on their gun-butts. But the rider was Doc Henley. In the light of the rising moon his face looked a little ashamed.

"They told me back there what yuh had done for me," he explained. "I—I got to thinking it over." He was no longer shaky. Instead he weaved a little in the saddle. "Besides," he grinned amiably, "I'd left some liquor there."

CHAPTER THREE

Three Gringos In Hell

IT BECAME obvious before long that Doc Henley had gotten a couple of bottles to take in his saddle bags, for he managed to stay a little drunk during most of their ride. When they crossed the desert stretch nearing the hide-out, though, he began to suffer. Red-eyed, he soon drank up all the water in his canteen, in an attempt to quench the twin fires which the sun and the whiskey set up in him.

Steve saw Solitaire Varnum offer Henley his own canteen, and wondered. Yet in the end, he himself did likewise. He had enough, he told himself, indifferently, and it didn't matter if he got there a little thirsty.

When night came, Doc had finished the available water, and encouraged by the coolness, began again on what was left of the whiskey. When they arrived at the hide-out, he was tipsily singing a lugubrious cowboy song.

It was just as well, for the guard evidently recognized his voice, and let them come up to him without suspicion.

Steve stuck a gun into his belly while the others bound and gagged the man and they rode into the sleeping camp.

Doc Henley continued to bawl his drunken song at the top of his voice. Steve thought of stopping him, but then shrugged, figuring it was too late.

A blanket-muffled form sat up in its place by the dying embers of a fire and cursed them sleepily in Spanish. From one of the shacks nearby another voice cried out angrily: *"Silencio, gringo borrachon!* You theenk no one mus' sleep because you are dronk?"

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Doc Henley got down from his horse and staggered toward the shack.

"Don't be angry, amigo," he said in Spanish. "I bring you tequila—the finest!"

He went into the shack. A moment later there was the sound of a sharp thwack, then silence. The man at the fire hastily got to his feet. He found himself looking into the muzzle of Steve's gun.

"Put your hands up very high, compadre," the American's voice came softly, "and keep your voice very low, because your first loud word will be said to the devil."

The Mexican drew in his breath with a sharp hiss as his hands went up.

Another of the gang came sleepily to the door of another shack and found Solitaire Varnum's gun in his ribs.

"That makes the tally," Steve said, low-voiced, "except for old Juan."

He circled quickly and quietly toward the door of the remaining shack, El Tiburon's own sleeping quarters. The cripple, Juan—paralyzed from the waist down, but still deadly with a knife or sixgun, lived there also. He moved about on a pair of crude crutches, manipulated by shoulders and arms which were like oak.

Steve pulled up silently by the door, hearing the soft slither inside. A moment later, the door opened with a jerk.

He shoved his gun at the figure in the doorway and said, "Put your hands up, hombre, pronto."

The paralytic started a hand up, fast, but it held a gun. Steve saw the dim glint of it and lashed forward, striking at Juan's head with his Colt barrel. The old Mexican groaned, and his gun clattered to the floor, as he sunk down. But the blow had not been hard enough. The *mozo* was cursing viciously when Steve lighted a lamp, and kicked away the crutches.

Solitaire and Doc Henley came in after tying up the other men. Solitaire was grinning. "Purty neat work," he commented. "This'll be the easiest money I ever had."

"Too easy," Steve said sourly. "Three half-asleep greasers an' a cripple." He went to the secret brick in the fireplace and pulled it out. The hole behind it was empty.

THE tinhorn's rocklike features hardened and he swung his gun on the Mexican, who was glaring at them from the floor.

"Talk, yuh damn ol' *cabron*," he commanded savagely. "Talk, or by God, I'll send yuh to hell without a priest!"

Juan's wrinkled, evil face broke into a snarl. Then deliberately, scornfully, he tried to spit in the gambler's face. It was his only reply.

Solitaire's hand tightened on his gun, and for a moment death looked out of his eyes. Then the gun dropped.

"Looks like we caught us a wild-cat," he commented. "Well, seein' as he won't scare, we'll have to do some lookin'. My hunch is that Sanchez left it somewhere in the cabin. I figger he sets a lot of store by this watch-dog."

Steve nodded agreement, and under the baleful eyes of the old Mexican the three began a search of the shack. The trouble was that there were too few places to search. Not one of them offered any clue to the money.

They stopped, puzzled. Then, suddenly, Doc Henley, who was standing behind the Mexican, stooped down and hauled the Mexican from the wall where he was crouching. Doc's fingers clawed at the adobe; a small section gave way, and a moment later he stood up with a canvas sack in his hand.

They dumped the contents of the sack onto the table. Most of it was in greenbacks, some of it in gold.

Solitaire whistled softly. "Must be close to twenty thousand dollars," he exclaimed.

Steve moved impatiently. "All right," he clipped. "You an' Doc take it an' hit

the breeze. I won't need any of it. I'm stayin' here. I got a score to settle with Sanchez."

"Yuh can do that later. If yuh stay here yuh haven't got a chance."

"That's my business."

The gambler straightened and looked at him, puzzled.

A voice purred from the doorway. "You come to pay El Tiburon a visit, compadres? Thees ees ver' nice."

Steve whirled. El Tiburon stood in the threshhold, flanked by two of his men. The guns in their hands were trained steadily on the group around the table.

Instinctively, his hand checked its race toward his gun.

"Alto los manos—pronto!" the Mexican snapped.

Slowly, Steve put his hands up. A glance showed him that his companions had done likewise. Solitaire's face was hard-eyed, impassive. Doc Henley was pale, a tremor in his jaw. The liquor had worn off in Doc, and with it, apparently, his nerve had gone also.

El Tiburon advanced slowly on Steve. "Who sent you here to spy on me, gringo dog?" The soft, slurred Mexican syllables had the venomous hiss of a snake. "Speak quickly, before I put the bullet in your stomach."

Steve held his voice steady and even. "What makes you think I spied on you, greaser? I got better things to do than to snoop around after a dope-peddlin' snake."

Fury shook El Tiburon's whole body a brief instant. "For that," he choked, "you will die on an ant-hill, naked, your eyes to the sun and the little red cousins of hell feeding on the flesh of your belly!"

Steve knew then what he had done. He saw the startled look on the faces of the Shark's followers, who had crowded into the room after him. He saw their eyes shift toward the pile of greenbacks on the table, with a sudden, fierce look of comprehension in them. El Tiburon would not forgive this betrayal. He was already regretting that he had not shot without warning, that his instinct for cruelty had betrayed him. His hand tightened, white-knuckled, around the butt of the six-gun, and Steve knew then that death was but a fraction of a second from him.

His mind jerked and spat out the one thing which might delay his execution. "I reckon yuh know as well as I do who put me on to yuh," he mocked. It was a shot in the dark, but it went home.

El Tiburon started as though he had been stung. "Caton!" he raged. "You—you—*Por Dios,* I'll cut his heart out for this! I'll drag him at the end of my reata. I'll show him how to double-cross El Tiburon. He hated to pay me the money he paid me, eh? He set you on me to get it back. So! But the Shark is not so easy to fool. I knew who you were. He paid you to take the blame for what happened in Los Santos, then he paid you to come here. He was the one who helped you to escape from jail. I see that now."

STEVE stood frozen, his jaw dropping, his brain in a roaring tumult. At first, he had hardly recognized Murch Caton's name, with the Mexican's pronunciation of it. But the mention of Los Santos had set him right in a blinding flash. It had been Murch Caton who had framed him!

El Tiburon's furious voice ran on, cursing Steve and cursing Murch Caton, but Steve scarcely heard it. His mind could take hold of nothing but the fact that Murch Caton was head of the dope ring in Hardwood and that he, Steve Calvert, was here about to die, helpless to do anything about it.

"He will die for it," El Tiburon spat, his face hideous, "but you will die *now.*"

At Steve's side, Solitaire Varnum made a sharp movement. El Tiburon's vicious, warning gaze shifted to the gambler. It

was the first time his eyes had left Steve for an instant, and in that instant, Steve struck.

His left arm lashed down, gripping the Mexican's gun. His right arced in a driving over-arm blow that smashed against the Mexican's cheekbone. El Tiburon staggered back, lost his footing and went down. His gun came loose in Steve's hand.

Steve leaped sidewise, as the man at El Tiburon's right fired, and his movement had brought him within reach of old Juan, the cripple. Desperately, he flung the cripple off, was aware that Solitaire Varnum had swept the lamp from the table, hurling it in the faces of the bandits.

The room became a hell of muzzle-flash and gun-thunder. Steve was triggering now, firing at the dim forms which showed in the light of the burning kerosene on the floor. His fierce movement had loosened the cripple's grip.

A Mexican went down under the drive of his lead. Another toppled forward, his face in the kerosene flames. The others, in a panic, were crowding through the door.

The flames on the floor had caught on the wall. The old, sun-dried planking caught in a fierce flame. There was no way out of the shack except through the door and in a moment that would be a holocaust. The only way to escape from the fire-trap was to go now.

"Come on, quick," he yelled. "After 'em!"

He flashed to the door, with Doc Henley at his side. Shots laced the night, driving lead at their flying forms, but the bullets went wide. Outside in the darkness, Steve crouched, firing at muzzle-flashes, edging aside, to keep from being silhouetted against the burning shack.

He realized suddenly that he had not seen Solitaire come out, and that there was only one gun firing at his side.

"Solitaire must have got hurt," Doc Henley yelled anxiously.

Together they turned back toward the doorway, now fiercely limned in flame. But they had not taken two steps before Solitaire's form appeared, burdened by a clinging body. The gambler had stopped to pick up old Juan.

Steve cursed himself for his own thoughtlessness.

Solitaire, a plain target silhouetted against the fire behind him, staggered as El Tiburon's guns sought him out. Solitaire hesitated, then came on, the old Mexican still over his shoulder. Outside, in a hail of bullets, he tossed the cripple to the ground, then moved sidewise toward Steve and Doc.

"Yuh hurt?" Steve yelled at him. "We got to shoot our way to the horses, quick!"

Solitaire's voice panted, "I'm all right. Let's go!"

They went—three grim-jawed men, guns spewing death, driving through the bandit line. They had to make it fast. The box-canyon which hid El Tiburon's camp was high-walled, unscalable on three sides —a death trap, if once the Mexicans had time to block the entrance.

Like a bullet-edged wedge, they drove through to the horses, flung themselves into the saddles. Solitaire had difficulty in getting up, delayed them long enough for El Tiburon's voice to send men racing toward the entrance. Then they were driving steel into the horses' flanks, flashing at a reckless run toward the entrance and the hot lead gauntlet which waited for them.

Steve felt vicious fingers pluck at his clothes. His hat, bullet-driven, sailed from his head, as he got through.

Barely outside the canyon mouth, Doc Henley's horse went down. Henley, dazed, scrambled to his feet. Steve was beside him in an instant, reached down a hand and swung him into the saddle behind him.

Ahead, Solitaire's mount was racing wildly. Vainly, Steve tried to spur his double-loaded mount into a pace fast enough to keep up. He had seen the gambler clinging to the horn, swaying in the saddle and knew that he was hard hit.

Some miles further along, the run-away slowed of his own accord. Steve came alongside, took the reins, and led the way off the trail. He could already hear the hoof-beats of the pursuit behind him.

Solitaire Varnum was bent almost double in the saddle, his head hanging. After a little, he said gasping: "It's no use, boys. I'm done for, an' so's the cayuse. Hit the trail."

As he spoke, his slowed animal went to his knees and fell over on his side, throwing his limp rider free.

Against his groaning protests, Steve and Doc got him into the saddle of Steve's horse, and, with Doc behind him to hold him on, they went on, Steve leading the horse.

DAWN found them in the badlands near the edge of the desert. It was wild, broken country, and there was little immediate chance that El Tiburon and his killers would come on them. Steve pulled up in a deep, narrow ravine where a small spring trickled from some rocks and ran a short way before it disappeared into a crack of the heat-blasted boulders. It was no use trying to go on. Solitaire had lost consciousness. He might even be dead.

In the dim light of breaking day, they lifted him carefully from the horse and stretched him on the rocks. Doc Henley bent over him. After a little, he stood up.

"He's shot in the abdomen," he answered Steve's questioning look.

"Any chance for him?"

Doc Henley shook his head hopelessly. "Not the way it is. In a hospital, he could be operated on; there'd be a good chance. Here. . . ." He lifted his shoulders expressively.

"Why can't you operate on him?"

"I?" Doc Henley sounded at once outraged and terrified. "You—you don't know what you're talking about, man!"

Steve saw that Doc's face was haggard and that he was shaking all over. He remembered about the liquor, saw that Henley was a sick man himself.

He looked down at the wounded tinhorn and saw that Solitaire's slate gray eyes had opened, that his lips were moving. He bent down.

"Get goin'," the gambler whispered. "Can't either Henley or me—make it—across the desert. One hoss—one man. He's sick—shot with drink. I'm done. Go on. Don't—be—fool. Without us—you can—make it. Good luck . . . Kid . . ."

His eyes fell shut, his voice died away.

Steve got to his feet. For a long moment he stood staring off into the direction in which he knew the desert to be. What Solitaire had said was true. They were cut off from the other trail to the border. El Tiburon would be watching that. They had had to cut across a corner of the desert on their way to the hideout, but this way would be twice as long. One man, with water, on horseback, could make it. But it was doubtful if two could, with only one horse.

There was but one sensible thing to do, and that was to pull out—follow Solitaire's advice. He couldn't help by staying—and to stay meant to invite almost certain death from El Tiburon and his crew, who would be combing the badlands.

He stood, rocked by indecision, envisioning in his mind the dark, saturnine, sneering face of Murch Caton. Murch Caton, the man who had wrecked his life, who, even now, was fattening on the life blood, the shattered bodies and lost souls, of other victims. And alone, apparently, among honest men, Steve Calvert knew it. Didn't he owe it, not only to himself, but to others, to live? Solitaire would die,

but then Solitaire didn't have a chance anyway. Doc Henley would be left alone to die at El Tiburon's hands or to succumb to the maddening torture of the desert. But what of it? Doc Henley was only one man. . . .

That was what his mind told him—clear and cold. But there was something else in him that said otherwise. He kept remembering how Solitaire Varnum had gone back to save an old cripple. In the end, when he turned, his face was strained and gray, but his eyes were steady and his mouth tight.

"The first thing to do," he told Doc Henley, evenly, "is to give Solitaire his chance. You're operatin' on him—whether yuh like it or not."

Doc Henley stared. "You're crazy! Nobody could do that. I haven't anything to operate with—no instruments, no bandages, nothing!"

"Then we'll have to fix up somethin'. There's clean shirts an' stuff in my saddle bags that'll do for bandages. I've got a razor that'll do to cut with."

Doc Henley's eyes were frantic. "You don't know what you're saying. I'd have to go in and operate on his intestines—cut off the places where the bullet went through and sew them together again. I haven't got anything to sew with, no catgut, nothing to keep out infection. He—he might die under the knife."

"He's gonna die anyway, ain't he?"

"Yes, but . . . "

"Then git busy. There's needles an' thread in my war-sack. Yuh got all the fixin's."

Henley's worn, drink-ravaged face was a mask of panic. "My God, man!" he cried out desperately. "Can't yuh see the shape I'm in? I can't operate on anybody."

Steve's hand came up with his Colt in it. His face was grim. "Make up yore mind, hombre—an' make it up pronto," he rasped. "Either yuh operate or yo're buzzard bait here an' now."

Doc Henley stared at him, the terror in his eyes slowly giving place to wonder, the wonder to decision. "Get your things," he said at last, his voice gruff and suddenly husky, "an' then heat me some water. I'll try it."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Desert Gives Up Its Dead

HUNKERED down beside the fire he had built of brush too dry to make a smoke, Steve Calvert watched something that came near to being a miracle. He saw a stubby, graying, drink-bloated derelict with hands which shook so badly that he could not make himself a cigarette, turn into something more than a man before his eyes.

Those hands shook uncontrollably even while Doc Henley was baring the wound in Solitaire's abdomen; they shook even as he washed the clotted blood away. But the moment the razor came into his fingers, the palsied trembling disappeared as though by magic. Steve watched the razor move in a swift, sure line, with the scarlet blood spurting behind it. Then he shut his eyes, suddenly feeling a little sick. . . .

He opened them again at Solitaire Varnum's groan. The shock of the operation had brought consciousness back to the wounded man. Steve saw that his iron jaw was set and his face beaded with sweat.

Solitaire Varnum was fighting to hold himself still. Steve could see that, in the set of his jaw and the clenched hands. The gambler knew what was going on and was trying to help. But despite him, his legs twitched uncontrollably.

Steve dragged himself over and sat on them. Solitaire's lips writhed, showing teeth clenched in agony. Steve could not be sure what the lip movement meant, but he thought he read the word "thanks".

Doc Henley was down inside now, his face intent, absorbed. His fingers moved swiftly, deftly, in a cleft of bloody bandage. Sweat streamed down his face. He whistled softly, absently, between his teeth, lost in a concentration which took no account of time or place.

The sun was higher now, streaming down into the canyon with a hard, hot brilliance. The beat of it on the back of Steve's neck was like a physical blow. His muscles were cramped with bearing down on those legs. But Steve Calvert was not sick any more. Instead, there was a queer exaltation in him.

It came to him that he was witnessing a thing so strange that no other thing in his life would ever compare with it. His eyes roved wonderingly over the rock walls of the ravine, over the scene before him. These sere, sun-smitten rocks of the Chihuahua malpais were looking down, incredibly, grotesquely, on a great surgeon at work. There was no more doubt of that in Steve Calvert's mind than there was doubt of his own existence. Here, as far from the cloistered silence and cleanliness of a hospital as the earth was from the moon—here, with bandages made of shirts and underwear, with a razor for a scalpel—here, a great surgeon worked, with the power of life and death in almost god-like hands.

Steve let out a long, shuddering breath, feeling a sudden serenity come at him out of the hot, pungent air. He realized suddenly that Doc Henley was alive for the first time since he had known him. Doc Henley was happy, with the fierce, self-forgetful happiness of a man who knows his work and does it. And he, Steve Calvert, had found himself, also. It made him shake a little inside him to realize how close he had come, in his bitterness and anger, to leaving these two men behind him.

It had been close, closer than the death which had brushed his back there in El Tiburon's cabin. If Solitaire Varnum had not stopped to pick up a paralyzed old man to save him from being burned alive. . . .

Steve knew why Solitaire had done that. It was because there had been something dauntless and magnificently loyal in that old man who had spat in the face of death rather than betray his rat of a master. Somewhere within his evil old hide, the cripple, Juan, had been a man—and Solitaire had recognized it.

It came to him suddenly that Solitaire's cold, slate-hard eyes had ripped through Steve and judged him fit for a dangerous job. They had pierced through the drink-bloated exterior of Doc Henley and seen the bright metal within. . . . And Steve felt suddenly humble.

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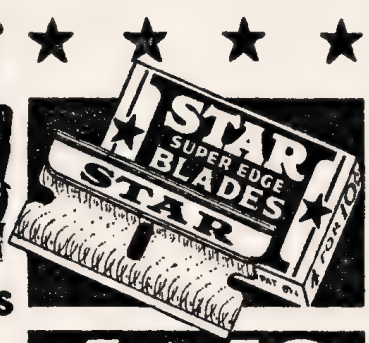

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UNDERNEATH the iron grip of his fingers he felt Solitaire's legs go limp. He looked up quickly, feeling a pang of fear go through him at the sight of the gambler's gray, death-like face.

Doc Henley took a final, swift stitch, knotted the thread and clipped it short, then he bent forward, a swift hand exploring Solitaire's heart-beat. A moment later he sat back, every muscle limp. His face was ghastly. His body shook as though he had a hard chill.

Steve's breath caught. "Is he dead? Is he going to die?" he rasped.

Doc Henley looked at him out of eyes sunk deep in exhaustion. "He's not dead," he said dully. "If he had care, he might even live."

Steve felt the brass ball of the sun beat through his clothes to his body, hating it because he felt it as it must be striking Solitaire Varnum. Slowly, infinitely careful, he and Doc moved the unconscious man into such shade as the arroyo provided. Then he sat down to wait.

That day was one of the longest Steve ever spent. He expected that every moment would bring El Tiburon. The merest slither of a lizard through the sparse brush of the arroyo rim set his nerves jumping. It didn't seem possible that the Mexican could miss this arroyo, even among the maze of twisting washes which made up the malpais. Every time the horse snorted or moved Steve cursed him.

He himself moved on tiptoe. And he moved often. He had to bring wet clothes to put on Solitaire's fevered head. He had to bring water to quench the thirst which raged in Doc Henley. The latter had turned, within five minutes of the operation, into a drink-wrecked bum. He lay on the ground and shook. From time to time he moaned, begging for water.

From time to time Solitaire was conscious and groaning. It was a day of endless nightmare.

Yet worse was to come. At sunset Steve cut brush to make a litter and hitched it to the horse with the lariat which hung at his saddle. They had to move on. Next day surely, El Tiburon would find them. But worse than that, they were without food, and the desert was yet to be crossed. That had to be done while they still had strength enough to attempt it. It was now or never.

Steve filled the canteen at his saddle and then made a water bag of his poncho. He put Doc into the saddle, picked up the dragging end of the litter, and they set out.

Carrying the litter so, Solitaire could travel without being bumped over the rocky country before they reached the desert. But even when they were out on the flat, Steve either carried the end of the litter or picked it up every time he saw that they were coming to uneven ground.

So they traveled through that night. The sand-absorbed heat beat up at them; the desert dust suffocated them. Even the brilliant light of the low-hung stars seemed hot and malevolent.

Twice, Doc Henley fell from the saddle and had to be picked up.

Next day, at dawn, they rested. Steve rationed water to Doc and Solitaire, then flung himself down, exhausted. His feet were raw sores, so swollen that they seemed about to burst his boots. His arms and shoulders ached agonizingly from the work of carrying the end of the litter. His tongue and lips were swollen with thirst.

He was wakened by a shriek of abject terror. Doc Henley was sitting up, cowering. "Keep 'em off me," he yelled. "I didn't cut the half of their heads off. I didn't. Oh, my God, keep 'em off me."

Steve's hand had gone automatically to his gun. Now his sleep-dazed mind took it in that Doc had the horrors. He staggered painfully to his feet and went over to Henley. "I'll take care of yuh, Doc,"

he said reassuringly. "Take it easy. Them fellers ain't nothin'. They can't hurt yuh while I'm here."

Then Henley turned pathetic eyes on him, beseeching, comforted.

THE sun was already blasting. Steve fixed a blanket to give Solitaire some shade. The gambler was tossing feebly on his pallet of brush, but his eyes recognized Steve and sent him thanks. Doc Henley seemed worse off than his patient. He was delirious. He lay back, shrinking, as Steve came to him with the canteen.

"I didn't kill yuh," he cried out. "Can't you understand? I was doin' my best . . . Bring me that cotton . . . . My God, he's going! How much chloroform did you give him? Can't you see you're better off dead? Can't you see it? An idiot—an idiot!" His voice rose to a scream, then died off in an agonized, despairing groan.

Steve sat by him, quieting him with voice and hand, as he would have done with a spooky horse, while Doc went from quiet to delirium. Sometimes, he fought off strange aborted horrors. Again, he seemed to be arguing with members of his own profession, his voice full of persuasive dignity: "The question of losing my license to practice, gentlemen, does not enter, as far as I myself am concerned. The excision of this tumor, surgically considered, though a new operation, justifies itself . . ." Then this tone would leave him also. His voice would shake, pathetically, as he pleaded, "Can't you realize, gentlemen, that he was my friend . . ."

Steve sat by him, bathed his face with water they could not spare, fought to quiet him.

At length he got to his feet. He stared at Solitaire Varnum and Doc Henley, and then at the horse, head-down in the heat. How much longer could that horse last? Quite a while, maybe. He had mustang in him, was tough. And when the horse gave out, Steve Calvert would take its place.

Two days later, a peon, laboring over his bean crop on the outskirts of the little border village of Casa Amarilla straightened and stared. Something—something like nothing he had ever seen was coming at him from the direction of the desert. After a little he rubbed his eyes unbelievingly. Then he turned.

"Hola! Hola!" he yelled to his family and neighbors. *Mire! Por Dios—una cosa . . . ."*

Chattering, crossing themselves, the others gathered. A man—a gringo was plodding toward them, weaving, but with a walk like the inexorable stalk of Fate. On his back, he bore another man. Behind him, attached to his shoulders by a riata harness was a litter on which lay another man who moaned feebly.

The man so burdened had cracked, swollen and bleeding lips. His gaunt face was etched in lines of exhaustion. His eyes stared blankly from red and sunken lids, yet they burned before him with some secret and indomitable fire.

He appeared not to see the awed group which came toward him. He went on, his lean legs slogging like slow pistons. The peons stood, staring, amazed and intimidated. Then one of them—a young woman, bolder than the rest—put out her hand and timidly took hold of the marching man's arm.

He checked, turning his burning eyes on her, looking like a sleep-walker who had been suddenly awakened. For a long second, he stared at her, wonder in his gaze, then his knees crumpled and he went forward on his face. The man whom he had carried on his shoulders rolled clear, babbling. The jerk of the litter brought a moan from the figure stretched out behind. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Three Ghosts Ride Back

STEVE CALVERT heard that part of the story from the Americans who came across the river when the news got out and took the three into an improvised hospital. He had no memory of it himself—nothing but shifting flashes of madness and thirst and nightmare, and a purpose which stuck in his brain like an obsession, driving everything else out.

His informant also told him that he had talked in delirium of an operation performed on the man he had toted in, performed with a razor by the third member of the party, on the other side of the desert. The local medico had scoffed at that, declaring it impossible. Obviously, the man had been recently operated on, and by a surgeon of the first water, but the circumstances were impossible. There had to be some other explanation. Nobody could have done such an operation under such conditions.

Steve recuperated faster than the other two. They were both in the same room, but he was not allowed to see them. for Solitaire Varnum was hovering between life and death. For a week, Steve wandered restlessly around town, then he was told that Solitaire was out of danger and could see him.

He went in, to find a gambler and a doctor who were mere ghosts of themselves. Doc Henley, he realized, had been almost as ill as Solitaire. The sudden shutting off of his liquor supply might have been bad enough for him. The desert trip, added to that, had nearly killed him.

Steve took a chair, leaned it back against the wall, and built himself a cigarette. He felt relieved. After a minute, he grinned. He didn't stop then to realize it, but it was the first honest, cheerful grin he'd had in three long years.

"I see yuh'll do," he said, and then sobered. "I just dropped in to say so-long. I'm hittin' the trail."

Solitaire's eyes narrowed. "Where at yuh makin' tracks for—if a gent can inquire."

"I got business in a town called Los Santos."

The gambler's lips made a straight gray line across his colorless face.

"Yuh can't do that, kid," he said. "Accordin' to what yuh said, they're waitin' for yuh there with a rope. Forget it."

"There's a gent lives there name of Murch Caton," Steve reminded him.

"Yuh play into his hands if yuh go hellin' in," Solitaire protested. "He's holdin' a full house against yore deuces. Take it easy. What's the use of gettin' yoreself throwed into jail. If they don't lynch yuh, yuh'll go over the road for a long time. Listen, kid, I know yuh been runnin' around with the notion that yuh want to get yoreself killed, but get it out of yore head. I was awake when yuh was standin' there makin' up yore mind whether to pull out an' leave Doc an' me. I could see that yuh wanted to live. Quit foolin' yoreself. The' ain't but one thing on earth yuh want, an' that's to go back an' clear yore name before that town an' that gal of yores—especially the gal. An' runnin' yore head into a noose won't help yuh do it!"

Steve's mouth was stubborn. "I been rememberin' some things," he said. "Bill Edwards, for one thing. He's sheriff, an' he's the man that turned me loose. I figger he had more reason to believe I was innocent than he let on. I'm goin' back an' tell him the truth. Things will have cooled down by now. Folks don't git theirselves worked up to a hangin' every day. Old Bill'll see that I'm turned loose on bail. With what I know, I'm gamblin' I'll be able to hang somethin' on Murch Caton before my case comes to

trial. It's my only chance, an' I'm takin' it."

Solitaire lay back on his pillow, his eyes brooding. After a long while, he asked, "Yuh shore this Edwards is still sheriff?"

Steve laughed. "He's sheriff or he's dead—an' he looked plumb healthy when I seen him last. There ain't a man in the county would have a chance runnin' against Bill Edwards."

The gambler's mouth tightened. "It comes out this way," he announced. "Yuh'll have to put off yore trip a while."

"How come?"

"I ain't ready to travel yet."

Steve snorted, and looked down, trying to conceal the sudden moisture which stung his eyes. His throat felt tight.

"This has got nothin' to do with you," he said sourly, at last. "I'm playin' this hand solo."

"Yuh don't get it, Steve."

Something in the gambler's tone sent Steve's eyes racing toward him, a question in them. Solitaire answered that question, deliberately, level-voiced.

"I'm Jim Gunness."

STEVE CALVERT'S head was still whirling when he went out of that room. It was hard to take in the knowledge that Jim Gunness, who had been held up to him as the bottom in lowness, was as innocent as himself—and a man framed as he had been.

Somehow, though, the pattern of the thing began to work itself out in his head. You couldn't lick a real man—not until he was six feet under, and maybe not then. Jim Gunness had never been sure who framed him. Driven outside the law, forced to change his name, he had gone through the same bitterness which Steve himself had known. But Jim Gunness had not given up. Counting himself as lost, he had made up his mind to war on the thing which had destroyed him. He had become the proprietor of dive after dive on the border. Posing as a ruthless gambler, in whose honkatonks anything went, he had stayed only long enough to smell out the dope dealers, with which the International line was rife. When he had trapped or killed the men he was after, he had moved on, to set up in some other dive.

The Mex who called himself El Tiburon had been his hardest case. Sanchez was cagey. He had refused to betray himself, had turned aside all of the gambler's advances. Solitaire had been sure of his guilt, but he was without proof it it. Then Steve had turned up, and Doc Henley with him. The self-styled tinhorn had seen his chance, and taken it, to ruin or kill the skunk he had been otherwise unable to trap.

Steve went out filled with a new-found humility. The tale of Solitaire's long fight against the thing he hated had shamed him. He, Steve, had made no such effort as that. And now Solitaire was bent on going back at last into the town where his real name was anathema. Even after eight years, it was pretty certain that he would be recognized. The risk he ran was even greater than the danger which hung over Steve.

At last, after weeks of waiting, Solitaire Varnum, grayed, gaunt, scarcely recognizable as the man Steve had first known, was able to ride. When that day came, three men pushed northward out of the border town. Doc Henley was riding with his partners.

LOS SANTOS lay ahead, a sprawling, prosperous looking cattle town, surrounded by well-grassed and watered rangeland. Steve's eyes grew bleak with memory as he looked at it from the ridge that bordered the valley to the south.

This was the home he had picked for

himself, and for the girl he loved. This was the spot from which he had been chased like a coyote. Something of the bitterness which had been in his heart since he had left here came back to him, etching his mouth in grim lines.

Solitaire Varnum looked at him. "Sure yuh want to take this chance?" he asked.

Steve's glance locked with his. "There isn't anything this side of hell that could keep me from it," he said. Doc Henley said nothing, but his eyes were worried.

From the moment when they rode into the main street of Los Santos, Steve began to look puzzled. Something was different about the town. A man he knew—Ike Smalley—recognized him and stared.

"Howdy, Ike," Steve said, evenly.

The man mumbled something and turned away. He looked scared.

The impression grew on him as he met other people. Their first starts of surprise were followed by looks of caution, as though they were telling themselves that nothing was any business of theirs except to keep quiet and keep their skins whole. Nobody offered to lynch Steve or even to run for the sheriff.

He stared questioningly at Solitaire Varnum, wondering if the latter had noticed anything, wondering whether he was imagining things. But the gambler returned his glance significantly. He, too, was evidently puzzled.

Up the street, a man was walking, carrying a black bag. Even at that distance, Steve thought he recognized old Doctor Harbison. A cowpuncher came out of a saloon and walked up to the man carrying the black bag. There was a brief parley, then the sound of a shot crashed, echoing, up the street. The man with the bag staggered, threw out his arms and plunged forward on his face. The cowboy slid a sixgun into his holster and walked back into the saloon.

Several men lounged out of the saloon from which the killer had come and stood idly regarding the body. Another man emerged from the sheriff's office up the street and walked briskly up to the group. Steve saw that a star glinted from the last man's vest lapel.

Staring, he quit his saddle by the body of the fallen man. It was Doc Harbison, and he was evidently dead. The man who wore the sheriff's star was a stranger to him, as were the hard-faced loungers who had come out of the saloon.

Regardless of their astonished and hostile looks, Steve bent over and examined the body briefly. When he stood up, the sheriff's red-rimmed, malevolent eyes were fixed on him.

"Yuh're kind of hornin' in, stranger, ain't yuh?" he drawled, in a warning tone.

"This man was murdered," Steve told him curtly. "He hasn't even got a gun on him. The murderer went into that saloon. What are yuh standin' here for?"

"Yuh guessed wrong," the sheriff told him. "I saw this shootin'. Griff Hodge had a grievance against the doc because Harbison got drunk an' let a friend of his die. The doc got excited an' moved his hand like he was goin' fer a gun. Griff shot in self-defense."

Steve stared at the man unbelievingly. He heard the words, but the full import of them was hard to take. This had been as cold-blooded a killing as he had ever seen. Doc Harbison was known never to carry a gun. And, unless he had changed a lot in the last three years, he never took a drink. Yet this lawman was making self-defense of it.

While he was still turning that over in his mind, the sheriff spoke again. "If yuh want to keep yore health," he said pointedly, "it'll pay yuh not to poke yore nose intuh what don't concern yuh."

Solitaire had ridden up close to Steve. Now, as the latter opened his mouth for

a hot retort, he felt the gambler's toe in his ribs and shut his lips.

When he had gotten into the saddle again, however, he asked, level-voiced, "Where's Sheriff Edwards?"

The man before him showed yellow teeth in a grin. "*Sheriff* Edwards?" he demanded, emphasizing the title.

Steve said quietly, though his heart was beating hard against his ribs, "I mean Bill Edwards. He's not dead, is he?"

The red-eyed man's grin widened. "No, he ain't dead—an' he ain't sheriff, neither."

STEVE, his jaw-muscles flexed, rode on. The three tied their horses to the long hitchrack in front of the courthouse. Solitaire looked at Steve curiously. "Looks like we walked into somethin'," he commented. "What yuh figger to do now?"

"I don't know," Steve admitted grimly. "I reckon the only chance now is to get in touch with Bill Edwards. Now that he's out of office, he might throw in with us. Or anyway, he might know somethin' that'll help."

He broke off, tensing, his eyes narrowed, more puzzled than ever. A man was standing in one of the windows of the courthouse, watching him with sudden recognition. Steve saw that it was Eph Boggs, one of Murch Caton's hangers-on. He was standing in the county judge's office, looking as though he owned it. He had been a down-at-the-heels handy-man for Caton when Steve had last seen him. Now, he had put on a belly, was dressed prosperously in black, and puffing at an expensive looking cigar. Steve was about to speak to him, but Boggs turned away from the window and a moment later they saw him leave the building by a side door and go toward Caton's Silver Eagle Saloon.

Steve turned to Solitaire and whistled softly. "If Eph Boggs is county judge," he said, "things are a heap worse than we bargained for."

A moment later the worried look went out of his face and his eyes gleamed. Bill Edwards was coming down the street. The sight of his gray, leonine head and strong, big-boned figure sent a surge of hope through Steve.

"Come on," he said to the others jubilantly, "here's Bill!" He led the way, striding toward the ex-sheriff.

"Bill," he said, and his voice rang, "I ought to have been back long ago. But I'm back now—to thank yuh, and to prove you was right in believin' in me."

Bill Edwards paused only a moment. He looked at Steve without recognition, then he turned the blank emptiness of his blue gaze on Solitaire and Doc. There was no expression whatever in his face.

"Howdy, boys," he muttered tonelessly. "Howdy."

Steve stood rooted in his tracks, his mouth working, his eyes unbelieving. Then he sprang forward and caught the ex-sheriff by the arm. "Bill!" he said. "What's the matter? Don't yuh know me."

Bill Edwards turned. For a fraction of a second there was a faint gleam of recognition back of the blank blue gaze, then it was gone.

"Howdy, boys, howdy," he mumbled, and went on.

Steve turned a dazed gaze on Solitaire and Doc. The gambler was looking at him as though to say, "Tough luck—there goes the last chance." But Doc Henley's expression was strange. There was understanding in it—and fear.

Up the street, a couple of the hard-faced loafers who had stared at Doc Harbison's dead body greeted ex-Sheriff Edwards with jeering grins.

"Howdy, boy, howdy!" they guffawed.

Bill Edwards did not reply. He had

begun to shake all over. In a moment, he was down on the board walk, his limbs twitching in convulsions. The pair who had accosted him applauded. "That's shakin' it, fella!" one of them called.

Steve swore under his breath and started forward, not aware that a buckboard driven by a girl had come down the street and pulled up before the fallen man. The girl was out of the seat and kneeling beside the twitching body before Steve recognized her.

Her pretty, flushed face was turned up indignantly at the two gun-laden idlers. "Why do you tease him?" she blazed at them. "You ought to be ashamed—you ought to be whipped, both of you!"

Curiously, the pair looked abashed.

Steve stopped before them, saying grimly, "I'm here to do the whippin', if needful. Want to start it?"

The pair shot him sullen looks, but, surprisingly, turned away.

"We ain't interferin' with the lady," one of them said over his shoulder, "but we'll have an eye skinned fer you, fella. Mebbe yuh'll want to talk big some other time."

The girl was staring at Steve with caught breath. She got to her feet, trembling, for the moment forgetful of the old sheriff. "Steve!" she gasped, "Steve!" There was wonder in her voice, and terror, and joy, all at once.

"Yeah," Steve said. "Yeah, Betty—it's Steve." He went up to her and caught her hands.

"I've come back, Betty," he said insistently. "Are yuh glad to see me?"

COLOR flamed into the girl's face and her eyes blazed with a sudden uncontrollable happiness. And then as suddenly as it had come, the color drained and the light left her eyes.

"You—you shouldn't have come back, Steve!" she cried.

Steve looked deep into her eyes. "I had to come back. I wanted to prove that I never killed Bud nor—"

"I never believed it," she broke in with sudden passion. "Never!"

His heart had begun to hammer against his ribs. "Then why didn't yuh come to see me an' tell me so."

"I couldn't. Didn't you know? Dad got a fall that day—hurt himself bad. I had to take care of him. I sent you word. Didn't they tell you?"

His heart was hammering now harder than ever. He felt choked with exultation. "I didn't see anybody," he told her. "Only Edwards, an' he let me go. I reckon he didn't get the message, 'count of the mob."

Betty Cranston looked down at the sheriff. "We've got to get him inside somewhere," she said quickly. "He didn't believe you were guilty, either. I think he might have proved it if—if he hadn't had his accident. I know he was working on it."

"Accident?"

"He was hit on the head, knocked unconscious. At first it didn't seem to be much. Then gradually it got worse. He began to forget things—people. Then after a while his mind seemed to go entirely. He began to have these convulsions."

Steve knelt beside the ex-sheriff, and turned toward Solitaire and Doc to ask their help in lifting him. Solitaire was staring at Doc, his eyes thoughtful, and Steve stared too. For Doc's eyes were rivetted on the fallen man as if he was seeing a ghost.

Steve was about to speak when a soft gasp from the girl drew his attention. A man was walking towards them, his boots kicking up little clouds in the deep dust of the road. It was Murch Caton.

Steve got to his feet, tawny eyes

burning, every nerve and muscle in him alert.

Caton came up to them until he stood side by side with Betty Cranston. His eyes flicked over Solitaire and Doc, then fixed themselves on Steve.

"So yuh came back, Calvert," he said softly. "I didn't think yuh ever would."

"I came back, Caton," Steve said softly, his eyes ripping into the other's narrowed gaze. "A man that's been double-crossed often will."

"So that's the story now, is it?" Caton's dark, saturnine face was faintly sardonic. "Take a fool's advice, Calvert, an' ride out, while yuh got a whole hide. This town ain't forgot. Yuh ain't safe here."

Rage was hammering up in Steve. He fought for control. This was not the time to declare himself, yet the anger and hatred in him got the upper hand. His tongue would not obey.

"A fool's advice?" he grated. "Are yuh shore yuh don't mean a skunk's?"

A dark flush came into Caton's face. For a second his eyes were malevolent, dangerous. Then he smiled thinly, without mirth.

"I don't often give advice," he said.

He turned to Betty Cranston, putting a hand on her arm. "Come on, dear," he murmured. "No use wastin' time here. I want to arrange things for tomorrow."

Betty Cranston seemed to shrink from his touch, yet she fought not to show the dark pools of fear in her eyes.

Hot murder flared into Steve's heart. "Take yore hand off her arm," he raged, and his hand lashed toward his gun.

Murch Caton looked at him coolly. "Draw in yore horns," he advised. "Betty an' me are engaged. The weddin' is set for tomorrow."

Steve felt as though someone had kicked him suddenly in the stomach.

"Yuh'll never see tomorrow's sun, you dope-runnin' double-crossin' snake," he blazed. "Fill yore hand, damn you!"

For an instant, Murch Caton's eyes flashed hate, but when he spoke his voice was even and contemptuous.

"Yuh're out of yore head, Calvert," he said. "I got no fight with yuh. I'm just warnin' you—get out of town while you're able to ride."

Betty Cranston cut in, her voice queerly choked. "I don't need you to interfere in my affairs, Steve Calvert. How dare you threaten my—my—the man I'm going to marry. You'd better take Murch's advice."

Steve stared at her, stunned. He felt as though the ground had been cut out from under him. Through a haze he could see her desperate eyes and Murch Caton's venomously triumphant face, see the forms of men behind Caton—hard-faced men, who wore their guns low-slung and whose hands hung near to the holstered butts.

Then Caton and Betty Cranston were turning away, her hand resting on his arm.

CHAPTER SIX

A Man Must Fight

A VOICE, acrid and impatient, cut through the haze of fury and unbelief which filled Steve's mind. "Well, are you goin' to leave that poor man lay there all day?" it demanded.

He turned to find Ma Coates in the door of her Sunny Side Restaurant, her arms akimbo.

Dully, automatically, he lifted Bill Edwards to his feet, helped him into the restaurant. The ex-sheriff appeared almost normal again, but his face was as blank as before and he had difficulty in walking.

Ma Coates helped Steve install him in a

chair, as she buzzed at him like a fat, indignant hornet. "You show about as much sense as most men," she scolded. "What are you doin' here? Expect folks to believe you're innocent just because you say so? This man knew you weren't guilty. If they hadn't knocked him in the head he might have proved it. But it's too late now." She tapped Bill Edward's lolling, nodding head with her finger. "If you ask me, it's all in there," she ran on, "but it'll never do you any good.

Doc Henley's voice cut in hoarsely, with a note of terror in it. "What's that? What's that you said?"

The stout, red-faced woman turned on him pepperily. "Who are you?" she demanded. "I never saw you before."

She turned to Steve again. "As for you, young man," she said, "you better take good advice an' get out of town. You aren't in good company, anyway." She turned like an indignant hen on Solitaire. "I know you, Jim Gunness," she said. "You might fool some folks, but you can't fool me. I suppose you'll be sayin' you're not guilty either." She glared at him angrily, then the indignation faded from her eyes and her voice quivered. "Not that I ever thought you were," she said, "but—but why didn't you stay away."

She sat down suddenly and dropped her head in her hands, shaken by a storm of weeping. Solitaire's rock-like features writhed suddenly. He put a hand gently, helplessly on her plump shoulder.

"Don't—don't," he said. "It'll be all right."

Her sobs broke off. "All right?" she lifted tragic eyes to him. "Don't you see you can't do anything here? Steve Calvert's made an enemy of Murch Caton, an' Caton runs this town."

"Runs it?" Solitaire's voice was sceptical.

"Don't get that tone in your voice, Jim Gunness. This is no time to get stubborn. Can't you see that everybody in this place is scared of Murch Caton. He's gotten a-hold of most of the land in the county. What he doesn't own, he's got mortgages on. He's elected his own sheriff an' his own judge. He's got a gang of hired killers workin' for him."

Steve stared at the pair numbly. He didn't know why it should surprise him so that they knew each other, or that there should be an undercurrent of understanding beneath everything they said.

"Get out," Ma Coates told Solitaire earnestly. "When he recognizes you there'll be no safety for you here."

Solitaire had a thin smile. "He recognized me, all right," he said drily.

Ma Coates came to him and put her hands on his chest. "Then go," she said humbly. "Go quick, Jim."

"An' leave you again?" Solitaire's voice was harsh.

"I've been alone, Jim," Ma Coates said, "but not altogether alone, because I knew you was livin' somewhere. I reckon I couldn't—stand it—if—if anythin' happened to you."

"There's been enough of this," Solitaire Varnum said abruptly.

The quality of Solitaire's voice somehow brought it home to Steve Calvert that he was listening to something he had no right to hear. He turned away, yet Solitaire's next words held him. "What about —Betty?" he said.

Ma Coates' voice shook. "Buck Cranston was crippled three years back. He's done the best he could, but Caton has been on him all the time. He wanted Betty, an' he was bound to get her. Now Buck'll be throwed out if Betty don't marry Caton. Even at that, she might hold out, I reckon, figurin' to support him somehow, herself—poor baby!—only Caton has got something on Buck—somethin' that would send him to jail. God

forgive me, I oughtn't to have told you that, Jim. She made me swear not to tell . . . ."

There was a red haze before Steve Calvert's eyes, and hell hammered suddenly in his pulses. Through the haze and the tumult in his head he realized that someone had come in the door. It was the red-eyed man who was sheriff in Bill Edwards' place.

"Yuh been reckernized, Calvert—an' yuh, too, Gunness," the lawman drawled. "It's my duty to put yuh under arrest. But Murch Caton has put in a word fer yuh, so I'm givin' yuh a chanct to high-tail it. Git out of town before sundown or yuh'll find yoreselves in jail—or worse!"

The red haze became a sudden fire in Steve's brain. He took two swift steps forward and took the lawman by the front of his shirt.

"Yuh sneakin' coyote," he raged, shaking him. "Who can you arrest?" The flat of his hand landed beside the man's head. It was a slap, but all the strength of a whipcord arm and shoulder, rage-driven, was behind it. The sheriff's head snapped sideways, rebounded. Again, Steve's palm cracked like a pistol shot. The lawman's eyes quivered, dazed.

"Git back to the skunk that sent yuh," Steve bellowed. "Tell him I say we ain't gittin' out of town. Tell him I say for him to git before I kill him an' leave his carcass to stink in the streets."

He whirled the stunned sheriff and kicked him through the door into the street.

Ma Coates sat down as though her knees had weakened under her. "Now you've done it," she said soberly.

The red haze cleared a little from Steve's mind. He turned to Solitaire. "Yuh ain't in this *compadre*," he said. "Fork yore bronc and hit the breeze. This is showdown. I'm takin' mine in order to take a varmint to hell with me."

Solitaire looked at him, his slate-gray eyes cold. "There'll be two of us, son," he said inflexibly.

Despite himself, Steve's heart swelled a little, but he said nothing. He knew that nothing he could say would change Solitaire's mind. Instead, he turned to persuade Doc Henley to get out while there was still time.

But Doc Henley had disappeared. And with him, Bill Edwards.

NOBODY had been watching Doc Henley while Steve was slapping the sheriff. Nobody had seen the terror in his eyes change to determination. Nobody had seen him take Bill Edwards by the arm and lead him out through the kitchen of the restaurant. And nobody, perhaps, would ever know the hell in which Doc Henley had lived during the moments since Bill Edwards had first come along the street.

Almost from the first, he had guessed what was the matter with the ex-sheriff. When he heard about the blow on Edward's head he had been sure.

That blow had caused a tumor on Bill Edward's brain, and the tumor had made all but an idiot of him. Once Doc Henley had known another man with a tumor like that. The tumor had made an idiot of him, too.

The man had been Doc Henley's friend and the husband of the woman Doc loved. He had known that unless some sort of operation was performed his friend would continue to be an idiot and, in the end, would probably die. He had called another physician into consultation. The other physician had said that the operation Doc Henley proposed had never been done, was unauthorized and unethical. He said that they must let nature take its course, that Doc had no right to perform such an operation.

But Doc Henley had believed the operation could be done. During anxious nights he had worked out a theoretical technique for it. He had persuaded the wife to let him try it. And the friend had died under the knife.

It had cost Doc Henley his reputation, his license to practice, and his belief in himself. It had sent him out to become a wandering, liquor-sodden derelict. And now Doc Henley was faced with the thing all over again. If he had been right before, Bill Edwards could be cured.

Then it came to Doc suddenly that he need not torture himself. The thing he was thinking about was really impossible. Such an operation without consent would make him a legal criminal—a murderer in the eyes of men and the law.

DOC HENLEY shivered, and of a sudden his heart was pounding so high and hard in his throat that he couldn't breathe. For he knew inside him that he was going to perform this operation, anyhow. He was crazy even to be thinking of it, but he was going to do it. Something inside him that was too strong for him was driving him to it.

Down the street, he asked somebody where Doc Harbison had lived. Doc Harbison was a widower, he had heard, and his body was lying down the street at the undertaker's. The house would likely be empty. He hoped the doctor had had some decent instruments. This wasn't the kind of job you could do with a razor.

He went on, leading Bill Edwards up the street, talking to him reassuringly.

They went into the doctor's house. The door was open and the house was empty. Doc led Bill into Harbison's office and stood looking at the glass case of surgical instruments. He stood there, wiping the cold sweat off of his face and hands. He held his hands up and looked at them. They were shaking as though he had palsy.

He laughed. At least, some kind of croaking sound came out of his throat, and he felt relieved. He knew now that he couldn't do this operation. No man in his shape could be asked to do it. Even when he had been a practicing surgeon, with his fingers supple and in training, with his coördination keyed to a fine point and his nerve rock-steady, it had somehow gone wrong. It was too delicate an operation for him now. Cutting a tumor out of the brain itself was probably too delicate an operation for any man. He had been a fool ever to have tried it.

He heard his voice, hoarse, urgent. "Come on, Sheriff. We're going out now. I'm taking you home."

Bill Edwards didn't move. He just stood there and nodded his head and mumbled, "Howdy, boy; howdy."

Doc Henley felt like yelling and cursing at Bill Edwards for not understanding, for not hurrying. For every second that Bill Edwards stood there Doc Henley was thinking about Steve and Solitaire and what was going to happen to them.

Then he was closing the door to the office, softly, furtively, and locking it. He turned back to the big, empty-eyed man.

"I gave you your chance, Bill," he whispered hoarsely, "and now God help us both!"

He went over to Edwards and put a shaking hand on his arm, guiding him toward the operating table. "Just lie down there, Bill," he whispered.

Presently the breath-catching volatility of chloroform was in the air and Doc Henley's eyes were remote, absorbed. He had forgotten about Steve and Solitaire now. Had forgotten guilt and conscience and fear. And though his hands moved swiftly, he had forgotten even that time was the essence of the matter now. He

knew that once the pressure on his brain was removed, Bill Edwards' mind might come back to him instantaneously. He might remember everything and talk the moment he came out from under the chloroform. But Doc Henley was not remembering that. His brain and his finger-tips were one, swift, precise, wholly absorbed in the task before him . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gunsmoke Remedy

IN Ma Coates' restaurant, Steve and Solitaire looked at one another and there was shame in their eyes. Ma Coates had gone to the door to look down the street, but the two men knew that wouldn't be much use. They had both seen the panic fear take hold of Doc.

"He done the right thing," Solitaire said uncomfortably. "He ain't a gun-fighter."

"Shore," Steve agreed hastily. "A gun don't fit in his hand. Yuh ought to have seen him, though, with that razor, when he was workin' on you. I never see a cooler nerve, or a gent that had his job hog-tied the way he done. It was purty to watch."

They turned their eyes away from each other, for fear the shame in them was showing—showing disloyalty to Doc.

Ma Coates came back and stood looking at them indignantly. "Caton's got that gang of gunies drifting around out front like a pack of coyotes that ain't shore a catamount is dead enough to jump," she told them. "I'm goin' to see if they've got the back blocked, too. If they haven't, you've got to run for it."

Steve looked at her, level-eyed. "Is Caton out there yet?"

Ma Coates shook her head and her blue eyes were troubled. "He's not in sight—won't be, likely, while there's a chance of getting lead in his hide."

She turned brusquely and disappeared into the kitchen.

Steve looked at Solitaire. "I'm waitin' until he shows, then I'm gettin' him. No use in yore stickin'. I can get him, and that's all that's needful."

Solitaire smiled thinly. "What do yuh figger I been up to all these years?" he asked. "Think I was runnin' border honkatonks because I liked to?"

Steve stared. "Yuh don't mean yuh was after Caton all the time?"

Solitaire shook his head. "I never even suspicioned him. He had only been here a year when I got run out, an' didn't look like butter'd melt in his mouth. It was him that helped me to get away."

He smiled bitterly. "It wasn't until El Tiburon made that break there in the cabin that I ever cut the Los Santos trail, or knew that Murch Caton was the man I had to kill. I didn't say nothin' to you because I hoped you'd stay out of it. Yuh had a gal an' yuh was young. Me, I've been a kind of a hard case, an' I'm gettin' along."

Steve looked at him sardonically. "An' you didn't have no gal, huh?"

Solitaire lifted his shoulders. "Yuh mean Ma? I hadn't heard from her in eight years. Figgered she'd be married again before now."

"But yuh hadn't fergot her any?"

Solitaire looked at him. "Not any," he said briefly.

Ma Coates came back from the kitchen. Her lips were pressed together tightly. "They're out back, too," she said.

Her eyes blazed suddenly, full of tears. "Oh, why aren't there any real men in this town?" she cried out. "They all hate that man, and there's not one of them that'll fight him. He's had everybody killed who tried to stop him. Even Doc Harbison—because Doc treated one of the dance hall girls who took Caton's dope.

She talked, I guess, and that was enough to sign Doc's death warrant."

Steve shifted uncomfortably. "It'll be over soon," he said.

Ma Coates stared before her. "Yes," she said quietly. "Soon."

The minutes slid by. Out in the street, the rays of the sun slanted lower and lower. A fly buzzed on the ceiling. In the silence of the room it sounded loud, somehow frantic.

Steve got up and lounged to the door. Outside, the street was almost empty except for Caton's gunies. They stood, nearly a dozen of them, standing tensely along the boardwalks.

Two of them, opposite the restaurant, straightened at sight of Steve. Their eyes were wary, their hands close to the butts of holstered guns. But they did not draw. Steve understood that they had their orders, that the time had not yet come.

A FLICKER of movement behind the blinds of an upstairs window across the street caught his eye. Something glinted briefly in the late sun and then was invisible.

He turned back to Solitaire, his eyes hard. "He's got a nice trap set," he said grimly. "Watch the roofs an' windows when the time comes."

Solitaire's eyes were contemptuous. "It's his way," he said. "There's two of us —one of us ought to be able to last long enough to get to him."

Steve nodded, took out his six-gun and examined it carefully before putting it back loosely into leather. Solitaire did likewise.

Ma Coates came out from the kitchen. She had two matched, ivory-handled Colts in her hands. "These were Ben Coates' guns," she said, handing one each to Steve and Solitaire. "He had his faults, but he was a man. I reckon he'd be glad to have you totin' 'em."

A man came to the door of the restaurant. His eyes looked strained. "Caton says to come out now," he said. "If yuh don't he'll burn the restaurant."

Solitaire said contemptuously, "We're comin' out. Where is he?"

The man glanced over his shoulder. "Him an' the sheriff is out in front of the Silver Eagle," the man said nervously, and turned away. They could see him begin to run.

Steve started toward the door, but almost immediately it burst open and Betty Cranston came in. Her face was colorless. "Don't go out there, Steve," she panted.

Steve's eyes went warm and proud but he said harshly, "You got no business hornin' in."

She looked at him with her heart in her eyes. "I couldn't help it, Steve. I went with him a little while ago because I thought it might save trouble. But my place is by you, Steve."

Steve said, "It's all right, Betty. I'm goin' to kill him now. I—I'd like yuh to remember that—that I never thought about nobody else but you."

He put her aside gently and stepped to the door, her sudden sobs in his ears. Then he was on the street, Solitaire beside him.

The gunmen had moved up. They lined the boardwalks on either side, opposite Caton and the red-eyed sheriff, who stood in the middle of the street. Another man was beside them. Steve saw that it was Eph Boggs, a pair of guns beneath the skirts of his black coat.

He and Solitaire walked toward that group. They walked swiftly, without hesitation, but with eyes alert for the first movement from the roofs or windows. It seemed strange to think that in just a moment now that silent street would break into a hell of blasting guns, that lead from every side would rip into the flesh of their bodies.

Steve saw a movement in the window he had remarked before, and he whirled, his hand going to his gun. But the movement checked, and there was a hoarse exclamation from in front of him. A glance showed him a group of fifteen heavily armed riders who had come suddenly into the street. He caught his breath. The riders were Mexicans, and El Tiburon was at their head!

HE heard Murch Caton's exclamation: "Well, by God, amigo, what are you doin' here?"

El Tiburon pulled his horse up and said clearly, "I have come to keel you, you double-crossing dog."

Steve saw that he had a gun in his hand. As he spoke, he raised the gun, and Murch Caton went deathly pale.

"Yuh gone loco?" he gasped. But there was death in El Tiburon's eyes and after that first moment's paralysis, Caton moved, flinging himself aside, his hand lashing for his gun.

As he moved the street crashed to a double report. El Tiburon, his smoking six-shooter in his hand, sat rigid in his saddle a moment, a look of complete unbelief on his face, then he pitched head foremost to the ground.

There was a split second of silence during which Steve realized that the Mexican had been shot from a roof-top. One of the men who had been placed to bushwhack himself and Solitaire had shot fast enough to save Murch Caton's life.

Then the silence went to pieces in a blast of exploding guns. Caton's gunies, lined up on either side of the street, had been caught off guard. Their hands streaked for their guns now, but El Tiburon's men were ready.

Steve saw two of Caton's gunmen stagger and plunge forward. Others were hit, but their guns lashed up, spurting pale flame. Steve stood still, a little dazed by the suddenness of the thing which had saved him and Solitaire from sure death.

The street was a wild confusion of darting men, screaming horses and the crazy, hysterical crash of gunfire. The Caton gunmen who had survived the first fire had scattered, some up the street, some down, taking cover where they could find it. The Mexicans were in the center and in a bad position. It was touch and go as to whether or not they would put spurs to their mounts and run. But one of them yelled in Spanish, "Kill the gringo dogs. Run them down!" And that decided it.

A lust for battle swept the bandit ranks. Horses, half-wild with excitement, and the goring of spurs leaped toward the crouching, death-spitting guns of Caton's men. It was a dog-fight, a snarling mess —without mercy or quarter.

Steve felt something pluck his shirt sleeve and was faintly aware of the crack of a gun behind him. The other sharpshooter in the upstairs window had tried for him and missed. Steve could see the man's taut face behind his gun as he aimed again. His own gun came up, lashed its voice into the tumult. The face in the window jerked, and then dropped.

A gunman across the street threw a shot at Steve and Solitaire. And then they, too, were in the fight, guns bucking against their palms, trading shots with Mexican and gringo alike.

Steve drove forward, grim-faced. Somewhere in that maelstrom of death was Murch Caton, still unhurt. Nothing counted with Steve but to shoot his way to him and blast the life from him. Solitaire was at his side, gaunt, rock-like features blazing with the joy of battle. Somehow, the red-eyed sheriff came up before him and Steve shot him down. Then there was the paunchy figure of Judge Eph Boggs, with his gun leveled at Steve's middle. Too late, Steve swung his gun toward the black-vested belly. But

Eph Boggs did not fire. Solitaire's lead took him before he could, and the new judge of Los Santos County had held a crooked court for the last time.

They were in the middle of it now. Lead tore at Steve's side, spun him, to find himself face to face with the lean figure of Murch Caton, eyes venomous behind a roaring Colt. As he spun, the boss of Los Santos shot again. Steve heard the snarl of the slug past his ear, and laughed aloud. Murch Caton's reptilian face was a mask of fear and hate. Frantically, he tried to thumb his gun hammer again. Then Steve's bullet took him.

The breath went out of the dope runner in a hard rush, and he stood teetering. Steve snarled, "That's one for me." His gun bucked again. "And there's one for Jim Gunness." Caton's knees buckled and his arms went outward.

Steve Calvert stood there, staring at Murch Caton, watching him die, oblivious of everything else in the world.

A HAND plucked at his arm. He was aware suddenly that the street was silent. After the gun-thunder which had ripped it up and down, that silence seemed strange and deeper than the preceding storm. He whirled on the man who had touched his arm and found himself looking in Doc Henley's excited face. Back of Doc was Solitaire, a grin on his gaunt, powder-blackened jaws.

Dimly Steve was aware that a small group of horsemen were pounding out of sight up the street, and he knew that it must be what was left of El Tiburon's gang. Except for the twisted bodies in the dust, there was no sign of Caton's men. Those who were able, had drifted out of sight, knowing that their day in Los Santos was over. In their place the street was filling with honest townsmen, and the look on their faces was that of men at a fiesta.

"I heard the shootin' an' I came as soon as I could, Steve," Doc was saying earnestly. "Bill Edwards is all right. He's got the evidence to clear you. An' the proof that Caton himself killed Bud Dawson when Bud tried to quit him."

Steve stared at him blankly. "Bill Edwards? Yuh don't mean to say...?"

"I operated on him, an' he's all right," Doc Henley's chin was lifted because of the pride in him. "He's goin' to be well."

IT WAS two days later that Jim Gunness, who had been Solitaire Varnum, got up from his seat behind the judge's desk in the courthouse.

"Mebbe it ain't just legal," he told the crowd in the room, "but law kind of got stampeded out of Los Santos some years ago, it seems. Before we bring it back, it looks like we better straighten out the mess that's been made, an' start with a clean deck." He held up a bunch of papers. "These here mortgages which was found in Murch Caton's safe is hereby declared null an' void. An' this here court holds furthermore that all them that has lost property to Murch Caton gits it back, free an' clear." A cheer, full-throated and approving, burst from the crowd.

"An' now, *amigos*," Solitaire said, "this here emergency court's adjourned. Bill Edwards is doin' fine an' he'll be yore sheriff soon as he rests up a bit. Steve Calvert's here to keep an' eye on things, an' somewheres yuh'll find a good man fer a judge. So I'll be sayin' so-long, an' much obliged."

Kurt Graham, who ran the general store was on his feet. "The hell yuh will!" he roared. "Yuh're stayin' here to make the law aroun' Los Santos stand up on its hind legs. We need a judge that can judge men as well as law. How about it, boys? Who's gonna be the next county judge of Los Santos County?"

A roar went up: "Jim Gunness—He's the hairpin for us!"

Solitaire Varnum was silent, an' for once the slate gray eyes were something less than granite hard. His Adam's apple moved a little, as though he were choking.

Ma Coates stood up from her seat. "Now I don't have to give up the restaurant," she announced. "But don't worry, boys, I'll have time to help Jim all he needs."

Solitaire frowned. "Now, ma," he said, "You keep out of this. If I'm goin' to be a judge, I'm..."

Ma Coates cut him off sharply, "Don't you talk back to me, Jim Gunness," she flared, but the softness in her wet, blue eyes told who would be boss in the Gunness household.

Kurt Graham flung up an arm and his voice was a little husky as he spoke. "I guess Los Santos has got what it needs at last," he said, "exceptin' a medico. Where is that doc?"

There was no sign of Doc Henley.

Steve Calvert, standing in a corner, with his arm around Betty, felt some of the happiness go out of his heart. He had his spread, and he had the girl he loved, but Doc Henley was forever outlawed. He had lost his license as a physician and Steve knew that not even the miraculous cure of Bill Edwards would get it back for him. There had been no medical man as witness. Since Doc Harbison's death there wasn't even a medical man who could testify to Bill's former condition.

"I'm shore sorry," he said. "He's one great little hombre, Doc is. I—"

Someone was fighting his way through the crowd, an oldish, paunchy man with a light on his face like the light of revelation. He was waving a magazine in his hand—a hand which had long supple, spatulate fingers which might belong to a great surgeon.

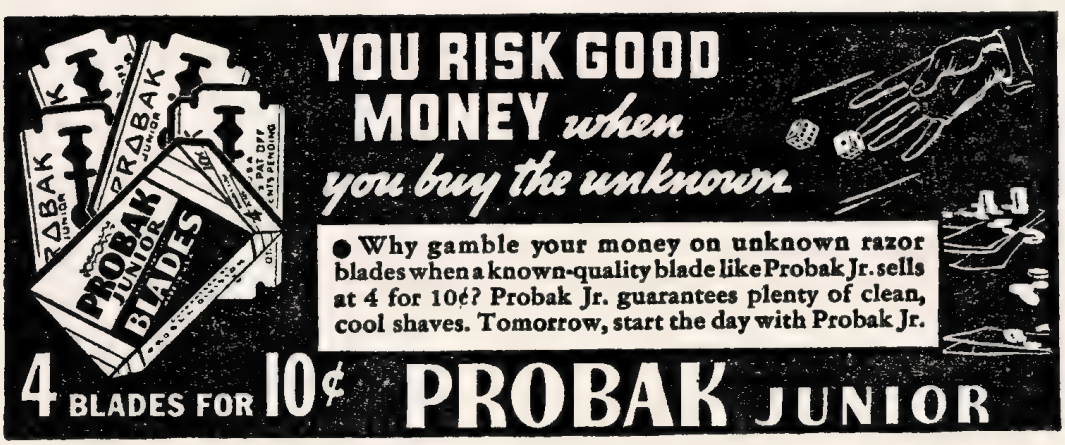
"Steve! Steve!" Doc's voice was shaken with wonder and exultation. "It's all right! I can practice again! They—they've been looking for me!" His voice was almost incoherent. "I just found this medical journal in Doctor Harbison's office. There's a man down East—one of the finest surgeons in this country. He's done my operation, an' he give's me credit for it."

The room was silent, then filled with a babble of voices. Kurt Graham's voice cut through the murmur regretfully, "I reckon Los Santos don't get its sawbones after all."

Doc Henley's eyes flashed. "The hell it don't!" he snapped belligerently.

And suddenly Ma Coates—soon to become Mrs. Jim Gunness—threw her arms about Doc and kissed him...

THE END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Lawman's Boothill Bargain

By John G. Pearsol

(Author of "Miracle in Gunsmoke," etc.)

One man knew the secret of Sheriff Jim Kincaid's dark past, and swore to make him pay a pretty price for silence, though to do it, Kincaid must condemn himself to a hell deeper than the gallows grave which, even then, was waiting. . . .

THROUGH all the sixteen years that Jim Kincaid had been sheriff of Latigo, he had thought of the irony of one fact, and had gloried in it: That he, a wanted man, with a price on his head and hunted by the law, should be wearing the badge of sheriff and dispensing the law in Latigo.

Sixteen years ago, when they had elected Jim Kincaid sheriff, he hadn't wanted the office. He didn't like the law. He despised the thing that had driven him

from his father's home up north. He was embittered by the trick that Fate had played on him, to make him hunted. But in the years that he had been at Latigo he had been a model man. He had established himself as honest, respectable, fearless. He tried hard to do it, so that no one would ever wonder if maybe Jim Kincaid might be running from something.

Then when they'd told him that they wanted to run him for sheriff, Jim Kincaid had smiled his best smile.

"If I'm the people's choice," he told them, "I'll try to do my work well."

But that wasn't the way Kincaid really felt about it at all. He felt that he owed the law a slap in the face. He felt that he owed society a big laugh at their expense. And after he was elected he laughed to himself, thinking of the irony of the badge on his vest front. He, the man they knew up north as Harry Lake, wanted for murder, was now a sheriff with a badge on his vest. He laughed because he was slapping back now at the law which had smashed at him with all its power.

Jim Kincaid was bitter because he really hadn't intended to kill a man then. He had been arguing with Bill Karew, the foreman of an outfit neighboring Jim Kincaid's father's ranch. About the tally of Kincaid cows, in a general roundup, the argument had been, and it grew hot.

"Are you tryin' to say I tallied cows for us that should have been tallied for you?" asked Bill Karew softly. "Is that the thing you've been tryin' to get off your chest?"

"It's funny," said Harry Lake, the man who was now known as Jim Kincaid. "It's funny that—"

"Well, hell!" interrupted Bill Karew. "I'll show yuh!"

Bill Karew's hand swung down behind him. Harry Lake's gun crashed in the smoke-filled bar-room, and a look of surprise and condemnation had swept over Bill Karew's face as he fell forward, a hole in his chest. Kincaid remembered the smell of the smoke as it drifted up into his nose, the dead feeling of remorse as he looked down and watched them turn Bill Karew over, for there was no gun at all on Karew's hip. His hand had been reaching for a tally book, a book with which he had kept account of the cattle he had counted. Bill Karew had been reaching for a book—not a gun....

AFTER that, Jim Kincaid could never remember very clearly what he'd done. He remembered the feeling of resentment that swept up over him as the punchers looked at him with scorn. He remembered lashing out at them with bitter words in his own defense, telling them that he had thought Bill Karew was reaching for a gun.

"Thought!" one old ranny had said bitingly. "You thought! You *didn't* think! That's it!"

Then the flight, the result of the terrible knowledge that through this one mistake he would either hang or go to jail for the rest of his life. That everlasting, tormenting thought that followed him as he fled southward, dogging his steps, pushing him forward when he was ready to drop with fatigue, making him run, and keep on running, when he was hungry and tired and thirsty....

As he raced along, desperate, fleeing for his life, Jim Kincaid began to resent the law that hounded him. He figured that he should not have been made to pay for that shot that struck Bill Karew in the chest. He had thought Karew was reaching for a gun, but they had laughed at him, with a sneering twist to their lips...

That resentment grew on Jim Kincaid. It stayed with him. It was with him now, as it had been with him when he first came to Latigo.

It had spoiled all of his life; it had ruined his chance of happiness with his wife, Ann, the woman who had died just three years ago. It had made nineteen-year-old Blake Kincaid, old Jim Kincaid's son, seem to be a stranger to him all these years.

To Jim Kincaid, his marriage had been a farce. He had taken it as a joke. He had figured it a smart thing to do, that no one would suspect a wanted man of marrying. He had done it selfishly.

He had laughed when they elected him sheriff. He had been unaffected when his son was born. He had attended to his duties as sheriff with a feeling that he was an actor, playing a part, fooling the folks who had elected him. To Jim Kincaid, it was all a joke, as his whole life had been a bitterly ironic thing—running from the law for something he really hadn't intended to do; marrying a woman when, as a hunted man, he had no right to marry; being a sheriff when he had no right to be one. . . .

NOW, as he sat there on the steps of the sheriff's office, Jim Kincaid began to realize that those things that he had laughed at were real. The wife, Ann, who had died, whom he had married selfishly —Jim Kincaid knew now that he had loved her. He missed her. He wished he had some way of letting her know, now, that she had been everything in the world to him. He guessed that she had thought that. He never had let her know about the things he'd thought. She had never had reason to suspect that she and the boy were not everything to Jim Kincaid. He had been a good actor there, too. But now, old Jim wished that could have been real to him when she was alive as it was beginning to be real to him now.

He knew that he loved his son, the baby that had moved him not at all when it had first been born. Then, nineteen years ago, Jim Kincaid had figured that the boy was a good idea, too, like the marriage had appeared to be a good thing. He wondered now if all this was going to turn around and slap him in the face, as he'd thought that he'd been slapping the law in the face. . . .

So engrossed was he in thought that a rider coming toward him from down the street was in front of him before he realized it. Jim Kincaid's eyes lifted. He stared at the face of the man atop the horse, a face he could not remember having seen before. But, somehow, a premonition of evil filled him. A chill crept up his back, and he said nothing.

"You're the sheriff here, eh?" asked the fellow needlessly, for there was a badge with the word "Sheriff," that hung on Jim Kincaid's vest front for all to see. "An' your name's Kincaid," finished the rider.

"Yes," admitted Kincaid. "That's my name."

The fellow swung off his bronc, came over and squatted beside Kincaid on the porch step. Jim Kincaid couldn't help but notice that the stranger had squatted where he could stop a draw if Kincaid started one, and where the man's own pistol would be clear.

"You can call me Stevens," the fellow said softly. "A long time ago I was up in the hills, me and about four other gents. We was just kids then, just startin' out on our careers, so to speak. We was camped there one night when all of a sudden a young gent come hellin' into our place. We covered him and asked him what the hell. He sized us up, and decided that he'd better tell us all about himself. He said he was runnin' from the law, like it looked like we was runnin' from the law. He said he'd killed a man up north, and that he was damn near done up, starved, and pretty near ready to surrender himself."

The man who'd called himself Stevens glanced at the new ridges of muscle along Jim Kincaid's jaw, where he'd clenched his teeth. Then he smiled.

"We told him he could join up with us," he went on, "but this gent was scared to stop. So we fed him and wished him well. Mebby you can remember something like that happening, a long time ago!"

Slowly, involuntarily, Jim Kincaid nodded. He remembered.

"I rode through here a couple days ago," Stevens went on, "and I took a good look at you. Your face is different. Your build ain't the same. But you still have that little puckery scar on your cheek. I always remembered that scar. I remembered it when I came through here. It bothered me that a gent wanted for murder would be a sheriff. But finally I doped it all out, sort of figured that you'd had a chance to go straight and took it. Is that right?"

Jim Kincaid sat there, frozen. "What is it?" he asked suddenly. "Why beat around the bush? Get it all off your chest!"

Stevens chuckled. "Here it is: You're wanted for murder. You talked too much. You told us where you were wanted. You're still wanted, I know, because a murder warrant never gets too old to serve. I'm still in the game I was in then, when you bumped into us. I'll never have the luck to have a county pin a badge on my vest. But since I've stumbled onto you, I'll use you. Sabe now? You're as much of a cheat as I am. I don't like four-flushers. You can take your choice of going back and standing trial for murder, or playing ball with me. I pull some robberies, and you take a fake trail. I do the work, and you keep everybody off my track. Take your choice!"

For perhaps a minute, Jim Kincaid sat there, the biting realization striking him that here, after all, was the showdown from which he had run so many years ago. Once again, his resentment of the law burned within him. Firmer than ever, he was in its grasp. As Stevens said, he must either play the game as a criminal, or pay the penalty for the mistake he'd made.

But now it was harder than ever to pay. Now there was the boy, Blake. Now there was the memory of his wife, Ann. . . .

"You win," he said bitterly. "I guess I'll have to pay when you call the cards."

JIM KINCAID watched Stevens rise and mount his bronc. He watched him ride away. It was funny now, after twenty years, for Jim Kincaid to realize that he'd been an embittered fool all this time. He'd watched his son grow from a baby into manhood, and told himself that he was using the boy for the same purpose he'd thought he'd used his wife, a shield for himself—only to discover that he loved him; that more than anything in the world he would like to have that boy love him, admire him, be proud of the name he bore.

Old Jim Kincaid sat there and gazed down the street and saw the boy, Blake, coming toward him. A dozen futile, desperate plans rushed through Jim Kincaid's mind—fleeting things that served only to taunt him. He groaned inwardly as he realized that wherever he went, Stevens would follow him. Now, and all the rest of his life, he'd be oppressed by this threat. Ony death could erase it. Either death, or....

Jim Kincaid smiled softly as he rose, went into his office and wrote a letter:

Sheriff,
Buckhorn County, Buckhorn, Wyoming.

I have learned the whereabouts of Harry Lake, a man wanted for murder in your county. Please send an officer to escort him

back, and I will conduct him to this man.
Jim Kincaid,
Sheriff, Latigo, Texas.

Jim Kincaid addressed and stamped the envelope, sealed it. He walked slowly down to the post office and dropped it in the box. He estimated, as well as he could, the possible time it would take for that letter to reach Buckhorn, Wyoming, and for a man to come back. Three weeks, at least, for the round trip. He wished that he could have wired, but there was no telegraph within seventy miles.

In an hour the stage came in, and Jim Kincaid felt better as he watched it leave again, bearing the letter he'd written. This was the thing he should have done twenty years ago. This was the music he should have faced, like a man. It was the only way now for Jim Kincaid to leave a clean slate behind him, a heritage of which Blake could be proud.

Jim Kincaid smiled as he pictured the deputy who would make his way to the sheriff's office and ask the whereabouts of Harry Lake. Then Jim Kincaid would tell him that Jim Kincaid was Harry Lake, that he was giving himself up, but that he wanted to go with him as sheriff, until they were out of the country. The deputy would agree to that. He would know that Kincaid would make him no trouble, for had he intended to fight he would not voluntarily have written for a man to come and take him.

Kincaid would explain it all. He would explain about Blake, the boy; about his wife, who was over in the little graveyard. He would explain that they didn't know, that nobody knew, and that he didn't want them to know, ever.

Then they would leave. Jim Kincaid would say that he was going out into the hills with this deputy, to look for a man he wanted. But they'd never come back.

Jim Kincaid waved at Blake, across the street from him, as he went on back to the office. That soft smile touched his lips, and a mist came to his eyes. . . .

Only one thing bothered Jim Kincaid as he entered the office again. The fact that he would have to play along with this outlaw, Stevens, until the deputy came. If he bucked Stevens, he'd spoil it all.

So engrossed was Jim Kincaid in the things he was thinking that he didn't know it was dark. He looked up in surprise at the dark figure of Blake Kincaid, standing in the doorway.

"Don't you think it's about time to eat, Dad?" asked Blake. "I've had supper ready for a long time."

Old Jim Kincaid rose, went out and down the street with Blake. He noticed that Blake looked queerly at him, knew that he was wondering why old Jim seemed so absorbed. He must be natural, leave no room for anybody to suspect there was something wrong, when he'd finally leave with the deputy.

He tried to be natural, but it was hard. It was hard because he kept wondering when Stevens would be back to tell him what to do. He squirmed inwardly at the thought of Jim Kincaid taking orders from an outlaw. Only now, with this new thing hanging over his head, did he realize that he had fooled himself about his job as a sheriff, too, just as he had fooled himself about everything else—about Ann, his wife, and about Blake.

Only now, when he knew Stevens would be back to tell him to throw his duty in the discard, did he realize that he had grown accustomed to doing his duty in all these years he'd worn the badge on his vest. He knew now that he was proud of that badge, proud of the way he'd done the things he'd sworn to do; just as he was proud of Ann and of the boy.

"Is something wrong, Dad?" asked Blake, at supper. "You worried about something?"

Old Jim Kincaid forced a laugh. "Me?" he asked. "No, son. Not a worry in the world. And never felt better in my life. But—but I was just wonderin' about you—about what you wanted to do, with your life I mean. If you want to be a doctor, maybe, or a lawyer, or own a ranch."

"I want to be a sheriff," said Blake Kincaid unhesitatingly. "I even talked it over with mother, just before—before she took sick. She wanted me to be one, too. She was proud of you, and I'm proud of you. She wanted me to be like you."

THAT was like a slap in the face to Jim Kincaid. His boy, Blake, wanting to be a sheriff, wanting to be like him! That was ghastly to Jim Kincaid. He looked down toward the plate on the table, so that Blake couldn't see his face.

"Don't ever be a sheriff, Blake," he said at last. "It's full of action, and it's got some glory in it, but I'd planned bigger things for you."

Jim Kincaid hurried through his supper after that. He didn't want the boy to talk to him. He told him he had some work to do at the office, and hurried up the street. Then he stopped as he neared the office, as he saw a dark form, the form of Stevens, lounging in the dark doorway.

"Something is gonna happen tonight," Stevens told Kincaid. "Whatever it is, you'll find out. But when you take out your posse, lead 'em south. Take 'em over the south trail, to Rincon."

Jim Kincaid nodded. Some outlaws would head north while he led a posse south. They'd get away, while he made a fool of himself.

"Be sure you don't make any mistakes," Stevens warned as he moved away and mounted the bronc that stood at the side of the building. "It won't be healthy if you do."

"I won't make any mistakes," said Jim Kincaid, and he knew he wouldn't. He couldn't make a mistake, with the deputy coming, with Blake saying he was proud. . . .

Jim Kincaid lit the lamp in the office, sat there at his desk and made a lot of meaningless marks on a paper in front of him. He didn't know how long he sat there. He just kept thinking how the kid had said he and his mother were proud of him. That was pretty swell, to know that. It would make it seem as though he were doing something worth-while when they slipped the noose over his head. . . .

A shot crashed out in the night. Then three more, fast and vicious. A man yelled as Jim Kincaid leaped to his feet, hurried to the door and looked down the street. He saw four riders spearing out of town. He saw a dark shape lying in the middle of the street, and a man running up the walk, toward the sheriff's office.

"The bank's been robbed!" yelled the fellow who came up the street. Then, as he stopped in front of Jim Kincaid: "I was down there, near the bank. I spotted 'em, and yelled. Bill Feeder saw 'em too. He shot, and they killed him. They went—"

"I saw 'em," cut in Jim Kincaid grimly.

He mounted, and found a dozen men at his back before he'd traveled the length of the street. At their head, he rode out of town. Stevens' warning, "Lead 'em south, over the trail to Rincon," kept buzzing in Jim Kincaid's ears. He pulled the nose of his bronc in that direction. A man rode up beside him.

"They went north, Jim," this man, Pete Harrow, said. "Their tracks branched off that way."

"It must be a trick, Pete," said Jim Kincaid. "There's no place north where they could hide. We'll head south."

Sullenly and reluctantly they followed him. Jim Kincaid heard the resentment in

their voices behind him, the low whispering, the name of Bill Feeder, the man who had been killed in the street. Jim Kincaid knew Bill Feeder, and he'd liked him. And now he was leading a posse away from Bill Feeder's murderers.

They searched till dawn, then Jim Kincaid led them back to Latigo again. And they still were sullen, aloof, speaking no word to Jim Kincaid when he left them there in the street.

He knew they were wondering about it, that they were puzzled about Jim Kincaid's stubbornness in deliberately leading a posse on a false scent. He knew what he'd think if he were in their shoes. He'd think that the sheriff wasn't fit to be sheriff anymore; that maybe he'd turned yellow. . . .

For three days Jim Kincaid watched them, and saw that even young Blake studied him queerly. Only three days of the three weeks gone by, and this.... What would happen before the deputy came?

Then Stevens came again. He came at night, as before. And Jim Kincaid had to struggle with himself to keep from pulling his gun, to keep from killing the man who had killed Bill Feeder.

"Don't make any mistakes, Sheriff," said Stevens softly, smiling as he watched the tightening of Jim Kincaid's jaw muscles. "Yuh see, all my men know about that little thing that happened up north, too. My dyin' won't make any difference. You'll hang just the same."

Jim Kincaid relaxed. He nodded. He wished that he dared tell this Stevens how wrong he was, that he didn't give a damn about dying, about the rope they'd put around his neck. All that mattered was that Blake must never know. But he couldn't tell that to Stevens. He'd have to play the game, pretend, go ahead and do the things that Stevens told him to do.

"The stage has gold on it tonight," said Stevens. "We'll rob it. We won't hurt anybody if they behave themselves. When they tell you about it, you lead a posse down into the malpais. They won't be able to tell whether you're right or wrong. You can't read sign down there on the lava. You keep 'em in the lava till daylight."

Jim Kincaid nodded again. He watched Stevens leave, then went into the office, misery in his eyes, deep lines of bitterness about his tight-pressed lips.

THE minutes dragged slowly, like the days dragged till the deputy would come. Now he wondered if maybe it wouldn't be better to just ride away, go back north by himself. But it was too late now to repair that mistake. He should have thought of that in the first place. Then he wouldn't have had to play Stevens' game.

Jim Kincaid kept looking at the clock. It was yet an hour till the night stage would be due there. Candless, a fat, pouchy man, president of the bank that had been robbed, came into the office.

"Have you got any news about the bank robbers, Kincaid?" he asked. "Do you know any more than you did three days ago?"

"No," said Jim Kincaid. "I haven't learned a thing."

"Have you tried to learn anything?" asked Candless tightly. "As far as I can see, you sit here and do nothing. Why don't you go out, hunt for them? What's got into you, Kincaid? Why don't you do something?"

"I've been busy, Candless," said Jim Kincaid wearily. "I do the things I think are most important. After all, it's *me* that's sheriff, and I'll run the office the way I see fit!"

Candless shrugged, and smiled queerly. "You may be sheriff now," he informed Kincaid tartly. "But there's no law

against you being ousted. Remember that, Kincaid."

Nervously, Jim Kincaid's fingers tapped the desk top as Candless left. Then a low rumble sounded in the night. The fierce beat of horses' hoofs sounded in the street. In a cloud of dust the stage swept up, stopped, and the driver leaped down to come running into the sheriff's office.

"Robbed," he clipped to Kincaid, "at the crick ford just west of town! They took a bullion shipment and headed south!"

A volume of sound was rolling up the street, the crowd streaming up toward the sheriff's office, attracted by the sudden stop of the stage there instead of down at the hotel.

Jim Kincaid was up in his saddle. A posse was behind him, one that formed like the other. But this time the men were silent, intent. They offered no suggestion. And Jim Kincaid knew they were wondering what he would do.

At the creek ford they stopped, looked for sign, but found none. Jim Kincaid headed west, into the malpais country. He stopped and looked back at the others, still sitting their broncs there at the ford.

"Well," he asked, "are you a posse, or not? Do you come with me or do you stay here?"

"Where are you headin', Jim?" asked one of the possemen, Pete Harrow, the same gent who had argued with him before. "It seems to me that the logical place to head for would be the brakes, to the south."

"I'm headin' for the malpais," said Jim Kincaid. "I don't think they'd head for the brakes."

"And why not?" queried Pete Harrow. "The brakes are nearer. They can hide better there. There's no cover in the malpais, and even if we went there we couldn't track 'em."

Pete Harrow was right, and Jim Kincaid was wrong. He knew that. But, until the deputy came, he'd have to play with Stevens.

"Am I the sheriff?" he asked Harrow, "or are you? Do I follow you, or do you follow me? I've rodded this county for plenty of years, Harrow, and when I make one bad guess you get heady. I'm going to the malpais. Stay here or come along. I don't give a damn which!"

Jim Kincaid sat there and waited. There was movement in the ranks of the posse. One by one, five of them came over and stood their broncs by Jim Kincaid. Their faith in him stirred him, made him ashamed.

"What about it, Harrow?" he asked.

"I head for the brakes," Harrow said stubbornly. "And as far as your bad guess is concerned, Kincaid—it wasn't a bad guess at all. Anybody with half an eye could see where them bandits went that time. And this is just as bad. You're the sheriff, sure, Kincaid—but I can promise you that it won't be long till you're not the sheriff!"

Then Harrow whirled his horse, galloped away toward the brakes, all but five of the possemen following him.

Jim Kincaid turned, rode slowly along ahead of his five followers—five men he knew now hesitated to follow him. He led them into the malpais. He led them in erratic circles that made his face burn with shame. At dawn he headed back to Latigo.

He was fearful as he led his five tired riders into town. He looked at the solemn group about his office as he came down the street.

He saw Pete Harrow there, a bloody bandage about his arm, and a cold chill of apprehension assailed Jim Kincaid when he realized that Pete Harrow and his followers had overtaken Stevens.

IN OMINOUS silence Jim Kincaid dismounted. He went into the office, disdaining to look at them, seated himself in the chair by the desk and watched them come in—Pete Harrow, Candless, the banker, a dozen others.

"My bank was robbed and nothing was done," said Candless. "Now my gold is taken off the stage and still nothing is done. I—"

"We found the bandits in the brakes," broke in Harrow. "We fought with 'em, but they got away. If *all* of us had been there, we'd have had 'em."

"The way the talk sounds," said Candless again, "I don't know whether it's a case of lack of spine or a case of lack of character. You're either yellow, Kincaid, or crooked! In any event, you're through! You've pulled your last blunder!"

Unspeaking, his lips clamped tightly, old Jim Kincaid let them have their say. Bitter as gall was the realization that he had blundered woefully in his deal with Stevens. He had blundered when he'd sent for a deputy. He had blundered in everything.

All his plans were now as useless as though he had never made them at all. Now he was disgraced. Now, when he would ride away with a deputy, presumably to hunt a man in the hills and didn't come back they would think that he had run away. If only he had thought to ride away alone!

Dismally he watched them all leave, and his face kept hot with shame as he knew the talk about him, circulating now in Latigo. Yellow, crooked, spineless. . . . One or all of them. That talk would hurt Blake, his son. It would shame the memory of the little woman, lying in her peaceful sleep in the graveyard.

Like slow, dragging, tortuous things, the days crawled by. They were days filled with anxiety about his being ousted from office. He heard the rumors about it, knew that Candless had written a letter to the Governor, that a hearing would be held soon. He knew that Blake Kincaid was suffering, saw it in his face as he'd sit at the table with him, and in his wan, tired smile when he'd come home.

"Maybe—" Blake Kincaid said one, night, "maybe if you had a deputy, you'd be able to do something about these robberies, Dad. Make me your deputy. Give me a badge, an' the chance to show 'em!"

Jim Kincaid smiled, and hurried away again. Blake a deputy! That would be worse than ever. Then Stevens would have a hold on Blake, like the hold he had on his father.

"Your dad is a murderer," Stevens would say to Blake. "You play ball with me, or—"

Then Jim Kincaid knew what would happen. Either Blake Kincaid or Stevens would die. That was what Jim Kincaid should have done. But he hadn't been thinking of himself. He'd been thinking of Ann—of Blake. . . .

One week, ten days, two weeks and more went by. Would the deputy never come? Had Stevens quit the country? Had Candless got his answer from the Governor? When would they hold the hearing? A hundred questions whirled in Jim Kincaid's mind.

Wearily, he went into his office now. He looked on his desk and saw an envelope with the word *sheriff* written on it. He picked it up, tore it open and read:

Kincaid:

You have one more chance. The last time was a close shave. But maybe you couldn't help it. We noticed you wasn't along. You better not let it happen again.

Tonight you have a tip. You know the stage will be robbed. You know that the bandits will head for the brakes again. Maybe an old Mex told you, sabe? So take a posse and plant it in the brakes right after dark. That way you'll get 'em all, red handed.

Stevens

P. S. And you better not make any more mistakes. One more will be fatal.

A wan smile twitched Jim Kincaid's lips as he finished reading. He was done, he knew. He couldn't take a posse into the brakes. They wouldn't go. They'd laugh at him if he suggested it.

Slowly he laid the letter down, then noticed that there were marks on the back of it. There was an arrow pointing down a line that was marked *Latigo Street,* and a cross that was labeled, *express office,* above it. Then there was another arrow, pointing north.

With a stunning jolt, old Jim Kincaid realized that he was looking at a picture plan of a robbery—a robbery of the express office, right here in Latigo! All of a sudden, he knew that Stevens wanted him to take the fighting men out of Latigo, so that he could rob the express office. And just as suddenly, Jim Kincaid realized that this was the chance he'd been waiting for, a chance to meet all of Stevens' gang at once, and kill them all, or be killed himself. This was the chance that Stevens had not foreseen when he'd said that it made no difference if he, alone, died, that all his men knew of the murder charge against Kincaid. But now, Jim Kincaid knew which way they would come, which way they would go, and *all* of them would be before his guns.

A grim, twisted smile came to his lips as he rose and tightened the cartridge belt around his waist. He stepped out into the street, looked at the sun settling slowly toward the distant peaks.

With a caressing motion of his hand, Jim Kincaid brushed the sheriff's badge on his vest. His head was high and his shoulders were back as he mounted his horse and rode down the street, out of town. Now, in just a little while, this badge on his vest would be clean. It would be clean and bright, for Blake to remember. Stevens was done, was finished. . . .

SLOWLY, keeping in the ravines, Jim Kincaid rode out the route Stevens' arrow had marked for them to follow into Latigo, out on the trail down which he knew they must come. Then he stopped, hid his bronc in the brush, and waited.

The sun sank swiftly. Darkness, quickly following the shadows that reached out from the hills, smothered the trail. . . .

Softly in the night, the sound of approaching horses reached him. Jim Kincaid straightened, stepped out in the trail and loosed his guns in their holsters. Dimly, ahead of him now, he could see them coming. There were five of them, and Stevens was in the lead.

They stopped, and Stevens cursed when he saw Kincaid.

"So here you are," said Stevens. "What about the posse that's supposed to be in the brakes?"

"There won't be any more posses, Stevens," said Kincaid. "No more of them to run where you want 'em to. You're done for."

Stevens was motionless. Then he sighed, softly. And as he sighed, Jim Kincaid moved, his guns coming up like twin flashes of light. They flamed, crashed into the night, bucked in his hands like powerful, impatient things leaping to escape from his grasp.

For a wild, fierce moment there was crashing sound and swirling smoke and screaming horses. Men cursed, and lead whined. Stevens and three of his men were down, lying still. Jim Kincaid was down too, lying where the terrific impact of lead had knocked him. But he was still shooting, still trying to hit that dancing figure atop the bronc in the trail ahead of him. Then, suddenly, he did.

There was nothing now in the trail that moved. Not even Jim Kincaid. As he lay there and peered at the dead men in front of him, he knew he had been lucky, that

he had taken Stevens and his men by surprise. He knew he'd be luckier still if he lived long enough to get back to town. If he didn't live, it would still be all right.

The deputy would come. He'd ask for Harry Lake, and nobody would know Harry Lake. The deputy would wonder, and that would be all. He wouldn't know. Either way, Blake could be proud of Jim Kincaid.

Jim Kincaid tried to move, and he knew that he couldn't. He was too weak, too tired. He imagined he heard the pound of hoofs, then wondered if he imagined it, wondered if it were a noise within his own head, or if it really was horses. He sighed, let his head rest on the sand. That didn't make any difference either. Only Blake mattered. Blake and the badge....

Then there were horses milling about Jim Kincaid. He saw Pete Harrow and Blake and a bunch of boys from Latigo. He heard them talking, asking each other questions that nobody could answer. He knew by the things they said that they had heard the shots from town, and had come to investigate.

"All the gold," Jim Kincaid managed to say, "you'll probably find on the horses —off there in the brush. All the bank money too."

Blake was bending over Jim Kincaid now, and he looked both sad and glad as he tried to smile at Jim. "Everything's swell," said Blake. "They know you're fine now. Just like I've known it all along."

Jim Kincaid lay there and smiled. Sure it was swell. Now, if he lived, he could ride away with the deputy, proudly.

"We'll fix you up here sort of quick," went on Blake. "Then we'll take you into town and the doc can work on you. You'll be well in no time."

It was sort of pitiful to Jim Kincaid to hear the tone of Blake's voice. The kid was worried, worried as hell, but he was trying not to let on. But he needn't be worried—not about these bullets. Jim Kincaid knew he'd live. Now that the shock was wearing off, he knew where they were, and that he'd live to do the thing he had planned.

"You got a letter," Blake went on again, anxious to talk and keep his father from thinking of himself. "I couldn't make out the postmark. It was blurred. I'll read it to you. Maybe it's important."

Jim Kincaid smiled, nodded. Blake was a swell boy. They could both be proud...

"Kincaid, Sheriff, Latigo, Texas," Blake read aloud in the dim light of the moon that had just risen. "Your letter received, stating you know the whereabouts of Harry Lake. There is a mistake. We hold no warrant of murder for this man. About twenty years ago Harry Lake shot a man here, but he did not die. As far as we know there is no charge against him. Signed, Simpson, Sheriff of Buckhorn, Wyoming."

No murder—no warrant—Bill Karew not dead....Jim Kincaid felt that he should want to laugh, to sing, to shout. But, strangely, he didn't want to. Somehow, there was something solemn about this thing. As though it were a lesson, to show him that the law he'd served so long could be just, as well as cruel.

"And now about me being a deputy," said Blake. "Don't you think, while you're getting well, that—"

Jim Kincaid closed his eyes. He kept on smiling as he felt the tender, careful hands that lifted him, and put him on the improvised stretcher that was to take him to town.

Blake, a deputy, serving the law Jim Kincaid served . . . It was a swell idea at that...

TINHORN OUTLAW

By Walt Coburn

(Author of "Tinhorns Can't Cheat Death," etc.)

A drifting cowboy, Henry Tweed played out his desperate, secret game in the blizzard-bound badlands. How could he know that his life would soon depend on one brief moment of laughter from his own lips—and that his silence would send him to a lonely, windswept grave?

FROM the cover of a red willow thicket, Henry Tweed watched the posse of five men on the north bank of the Missouri River. They were testing out the rubber ice that had formed during the night. The air was frosty, with-

Gripping Novelette of the Montana Badlands—and a man who wasn't quite bad enough!

out a breeze, so that the sound of their voices carried clearly.

Two of the men sat their horses, while the other three walked warily out on the ice that bent and gave way under their weight. One of the riders spurred his horse out a few feet, breaking through the thin layer of ice until the water was almost breast high. The horse kept snorting and lunging in the water. The man pulled his feet out of the stirrups and bent his legs at the knees to keep them out of the water. He fought the horse for a minute or two while the others watched. And finally he came back to the bank.

"No use, Sheriff," he said. "That ice won't hold a man's weight out in the channel where its thin. And at the same time it's too thick to swim a horse acrost.

I wouldn't tackle this river for a million."

"You orter know," growled a big man in a short bearskin coat such as the Canadian Mounties wore. "You've crossed 'er many a time."

"Shore have, Sheriff. And I'd be willin' to bust 'er wide open right now if there was a chance of makin' it. But there ain't."

"Our man crossed last night," complained the sheriff stubbornly.

"Unless him and his horse drowned a-tryin'. His tracks show where he went in. But what's to hinder him from follerin' along the river bank a mile or so and doublin' back on his trail? It must have bin nigh dark when he reached the river last night. The ice must have bin formin' right then. It would take a damn good river horse and a man with all the guts in the world to tackle the Missouri at dark when she's freezin'."

"The man we're after may have plenty of guts, so far as that goes, even if he is low-down enough to murder his partner. And he knows that he'll hang if he's captured alive. I'm bettin' that he crossed the river. She was open last night, like as not. You plumb certain that ice is too thick fer bustin', Rawhide?"

"You're ridin' a better horse than mine, Sheriff. There's no law to keep you from tacklin' 'er. I done give you my opinion. Your horse would paw hisse'f over backwards, fightin' that still-water ice. But you don't need to take my word for it."

"No need to git huffy, Rawhide. But it gripes me to quit. Them three gents held up the Valley Bank, killed the cashier and wounded two more men makin' their getaway. One of the three was shot down there in town. The other 'un was wounded so bad his partner killed him because he couldn't bother nursin' him along. This 'un we're after is the last of the three bank robbers. And he's packin' twenty thousand dollars of the bank's money. We was almost on top of him last night when we lost his trail in the badlands. We ain't more than a few hours behind him right now. If we don't cross the river here, we lose him. I shore hate to give 'er up."

"You don't hate it more than I do. I knowed that boy he murdered along the trail. I knowed young Pete Vail before he went bad. I reckon that bank kin stand its loss. And mebbyso that cashier and them other two fellers wouldn't have got hurt if they hadn't made a gun-play. I ain't he'pin' you trail this snake because of the bank hold-up. I'm after the man that shot Pete Vail in the back because Pete was too bad shot up to travel fast. If there was a chance in the world of makin' 'er acrost the river, I'd be on that yonder bank right now. But I'm goin' back to town."

The man called Rawhide reined his horse and rode off. The others followed. The sheriff was the last man to quit the river bank.

HENRY TWEED could have shot him. He crouched behind his screen of red willows, his saddle gun in his hands. He even raised the carbine and lined his sights on the back of the law officer. There was an ugly grin on his mouth and his bloodshot green eyes were thin slits. He would like to have killed the sheriff. He was almost sorry they hadn't tried to swim the river. He could have picked them off easily, one at a time, while they were out in the middle of the river. By the Almighty, that would be buildin' a tough rep for himself! Wiping out a sheriff and four possemen. Easy pickin's, and he'd tell it scarey along the outlaw trail.

But his grin faded and the light in his gray-green eyes dulled. He couldn't ride the outlaw trail, couldn't find safety in such hide-outs as the Hole in the Wall, Brown's Park, or the Hideaway, because he had killed Pete Vail. He had broken

the outlaw code and murdered a partner.

If ever those men who rode the outlaw trail learned the identity of the man who had killed Pete Vail, they would kill him. Henry Tweed would have to play his game alone, from here on. He hadn't figured on that when he'd shot Pete Vail in the back while Pete sat on the ground twisting a tourniquet above the ugly bullet hole in his thigh, there at the head of the brakes where the badlands start.

"We'll split the money, Henry," Pete Vail had said as he worked at his bandage, his words coming from behind gritted teeth, "and our trails fork here. I can't travel fast. Got this hole in my laig and a hide full of buckshot that it'll take a week to pick out. I got friends near here that'll hide me out and take care of me. You take your share and hit the trail for the Hole in the Wall country. I'm just slowin' you up. If you hang back with me, we'll both git caught. You count the money in two parts while I'm tyin' up this laig. They might ketch me, but—"

Henry Tweed's bullet had torn Pete Vail's words apart. Pete never knew what hit him. Henry Tweed made certain Pete was dead before he went through his pockets, taking what few dollars he found and a pearl jack-knife. It was a good knife. Henry Tweed had lost his own knife a few days ago. Anyhow, a dead man didn't need a knife any more than he needed money. It was too bad Pete hadn't more in his pockets worth taking.

Sure, they might have caught Pete Vail, as he had said. And if they did, and Pete Vail weakened and talked, the law and the wide world would know that Henry Tweed, cowpuncher and bronc fighter, had turned outlaw, and there would be a bounty on his hide and reward notices posted with his description. It had been Henry Tweed's first job.

He'd flirted with the outlaw notion for a long time, planning what he'd do with a good South America stake. Then, last spring, Pete Vail and another outlaw called Fred Jones had showed up at a line camp where Henry Tweed had been wintering a bunch of cattle. They had stayed a week or more and their talk of easy money and the fun a man had when things got exciting, decided Henry Tweed. They needed a third man for a bank job in the fall.

Against the judgment of Fred Jones, Pete Vail had propositioned Henry Tweed. And when he had agreed to throw in with them, they had made medicine with him. Henry Tweed had fooled around during the summer and early fall, planting a relay of getaway horses along the route they proposed to take into the Hole in the Wall country. And he had spent some time in town getting a line on the bank and when would be the best hour of the day to do the job. Henry Tweed could do all that without arousing a bit of suspicion because he'd never been in trouble with the law.

The time came to do the job, and Pete Vail got word to him. He met Pete and Fred Jones down in the badlands, and they'd made more war medicine. They'd all three grown beards and blackened their faces.

Henry Tweed knew that nobody had recognized him. He'd stayed on his horse outside the bank, holding the other two horses, while Pete Vail and Fred Jones worked inside at the actual robbery. Pete and Fred Jones had backed out of the bank, their six-shooters covering the cashier and his one teller and a couple of customers. Pete had carried the gunnysack stuffed with gold and silver and currency. A big haul. Pete had handed the sack up to Henry Tweed, who had fortified his jumpy nerves with a quart of rot-gut whiskey.

Pete and Fred Jones swung aboard their horses just as the cashier ran to the

door, yelling at the top of his voice. Henry Tweed had shot him in the belly. Then there was a lot of shooting from the saloon and hotel across the street and from the bank.

Fred Jones had been shot in the head, half his face torn off as he pitched sideways from his saddle. Henry Tweed had seen the mushroomed bullet tear Fred's head open, as they rode side by side. And Pete, on the other side of Henry Tweed, had been caught by a charge of buckshot and a rifle bullet. Tweed, riding in the middle, more or less shielded by his two companions, hadn't picked up so much as a scratch.

And not a single person had recognized him!

PETE VAIL and Henry Tweed had ridden like hell, till loss of blood had forced Pete to halt long enough to tie up his leg to keep from bleeding to death. Then they'd ridden on. Pete Vail had suffered a lot but never once complained excepting to cuss through clamped jaws at Henry Tweed for shooting the bank cashier. No seasoned outlaw would ever have done that. That cussing had bitten the drunken Henry Tweed deeper than Pete Vail had noticed.

"He was yellin' his head off, wasn't he?" Tweed had growled.

"What if he was? He didn't have a gun in his hand. And if you hadn't got scared and shot, nobody would have bombarded us like they did. You got Fred killed and me all shot to hell. Fred was right. We never should have took a nervous-triggered pilgrim like you along. I might have knowed you was yellow when you used whiskey to make you brave. You better take your share and buy a band of sheep somewheres. You kin do it. Nobody that knows you would ever accuse you of havin' the guts to hold up a bank."

Pete Vail didn't know it at the time, but he had cussed out his last man. Mebby if he'd kep' his damn mouth shut he'd be livin' right now. . . . No, he wouldn't either! Let him live to tell that Henry Tweed was mixed up in a bank robbery? Not on your tin-type!

Henry Tweed had a gunnysack with about twenty thousand dollars in it tied to his saddle. The bulk of that money had been put in the Valley Bank only the day before. It was the payroll for the mining company in the Little Rockies.

Twenty thousand dollars—and it was all Henry Tweed's! A South America stake, and no mistake. And that rubber ice on the old Missouri had given him a blocked trail. That was luck.

Henry Tweed got his horse and hit the trail. His heavy wool California pants had gotten wet crossing the river, and his underdrawers had suffered in like manner. Though he'd tied his clothes in a bundle on his saddle when he swam the river, the current had splashed some and his horse hadn't swum any too high in the water, as a good river horse would. Now those wet clothes were frozen stiff and his legs were numb. He had less than a pint of whiskey left. Not daring to make a fire last night, he'd used whiskey to keep from freezing as he walked and stomped his cold feet and swung his arms.

You're damned right it had taken guts to hit that river last night as darkness was closing in. He'd had to fight his horse into the icy water. He'd like to froze to death, almost drowned. But he'd made it, and he'd stayed hid in the brush all night and waited for the sheriff and the posse to show up. That rubber ice had been stronger medicine than hot lead. Damned odd what a shift of weather like that can do in changing things for a man.

Now it was spitting snow, and snow covers tracks. Not more than ten miles away was an old trapper's cabin and a

grub cache he had planted at Pete's and Fred's orders. He'd make a fire and feast on good hot grub. There was even a jug of whiskey there. He'd thaw out and get the wrinkles out of his belly.

He was making tentative plans now as he rode. He'd not be fool enough to tip his hand by showing up at any of the outlaw hangouts. He'd cache his sack of money for the winter. He'd hire out to some cow outfit and work until the grass got green in the spring. Nobody would suspect Henry Tweed of being mixed up in a bank robbery.

He had the reputation, as a matter of fact, of being a sort of bluffer. A man who would run a whizzer, but would back down if a tougher man called his bluff. And then there was that taint of being a petty larceny thief that hung to him like skunk odor stinks a man's clothes.

This petty stealing was something he couldn't help. It was like an incurable disease. Swiping, they'd called it when he was younger and stole another kid's top or marbles. That weakness of his had caused him trouble more than once. He'd been caught with another cowpuncher's missing razor in Dakota where he worked for a horse outfit. Up in Canada where he had worked for the 76 outfit, it was a red Hudson's Bay blanket he'd taken from the horse wrangler's bed. It wasn't the actual value of a thing. He'd just see something and he couldn't resist stealing it. They'd found the nighthawk's six-shooter in Henry Tweed's warsack when he'd worked for the Circle C. He'd taken a bad licking from Humpy Jack, the nighthawk on that occasion, and had been literally whipped out of camp. The 76 had fired him. And he'd either quit or been fired from half a dozen outfits for that petty thievery.

Henry Tweed had never read or heard the term 'kleptomaniac' but he was one. He'd never stolen a thing of real value. And because he was a top cowhand and a crackerjack bronc rider, he could still get a job with outfits that knew his reputation. Who'd ever accuse Henry Tweed petty thief, of bank robbery?

He had taken a jackknife from the pocket of the murdered outlaw, Pete Vail, not so much because he needed it, but because it had pleased his fancy. It was in his pocket now—a new, pearl-handled stockknife with the letter C scratched on its small metal shield. One of Jack Knife Ben's best, from his store at the Chicago Union Stock Yards.

Pete had been using it to slit one of his saddle strings to tie around his leg to stop the flow of blood. There was dried blood on the knife now. Pete Vail's blood. But Henry Tweed hadn't noticed. It wouldn't have mattered, anyhow. He had no qualms about the murder of Pete Vail. He justified himself in his own mind. Pete Vail had asked for what he got. To hell with him!

So Henry Tweed rode into the badlands, with the dry, hard snow powdering his hat and his sheepskin-lined canvas coat, and whitening his black angora chaps. He drank the rest of his whiskey and shoved his toes deep into the sheep lining of his pointed tapaderos. A South America stake was tied to his saddle, his back trail was blocked; the snow covered his tracks.

CHAPTER TWO

Murderer's Sanctuary

HENRY TWEED stayed only one night at the hidden cabin in the badlands on the south side of the Missouri River. He wanted to get this gunnysack with its money cached where it would be safe, then he wanted to be gathering weak cattle and shoveling hay into them, opening water holes and doing chores around some ranch or line camp. That

way, he'd look broke and peaceful if a law officer came prowling around. He didn't want to be caught drifting. When spring came, and the Valley Bank robbery was no longer fresh news, he'd quietly lift his cache and quit the country.

Henry Tweed stayed just long enough at the cabin in the badlands to shave off his heavy black whiskers, fill his belly, and get a little drunk. And luck again was throwing things his way. For it was here that he'd left his bed and his private saddle horse and pack horse. He counted the money into his warsack. Twenty-one thousand and seventeen dollars. He put the seventeen dollars in his pocket. The bulk of the money, mostly currency, thirty dollars in gold, he wrapped in an old shirt and stuffed into socks that went into the bottom of his 'seamless' warsack that had been originally used to ship navy beans. He stuffed the sack with clothes, tying it shut with a piece of string cut from an old latigo.

It was still snowing the next morning when he left the cabin and headed for the Two Bar ranch. To all appearances he was a common cowhand riding the grubline in search of a winter's job, leading the packhorse that carried his bed and warsack tied on with a squaw hitch. He had decided to hide his saddle gun there at the cabin. It would look better if he hadn't a carbine strapped to his saddle.

Two days later Henry Tweed rode up to the Two Bar ranch. He came along the stage road from the direction of Lewistown, from the south. He had swung in a twenty mile circle so as to approach the ranch from that direction. And he came along the wide road so that he'd be noticed riding from the south and not from the direction of the Missouri and Milk River, to the north.

He unloaded his bed at the bunkhouse and unsaddled at the barn. And he hired out to old Spud Stevens as he stabled his two horses and fed them.

"I ain't exactly short-handed but I reckon I kin put you on, Henry. I'm feedin' some stuff at the line camp on Box Elder Crick. It's goin' to be a long winter, accordin' to the old Injuns, and I want a man down there that ain't scared of work. You're bigger'n a skinned mule and no lazier and shiftless than the average. You kin tack sharp shoes on a couple of stout horses in the mornin' and go on down there. A load of grub is goin' down tomorrow. But just one thing, Henry, and we better git it understood right now. You got takin' ways, they tell me. I won't stand for any picayune thievin'. Understand?"

"I savvy, Spud. You needn't worry." Henry Tweed's face was brick red under the old cowman's direct words.

"Now a man kin respect a road agent or a real outlaw like ol' Fred Jones or that wild young Pete Vail, that took big chances and asked no odds. But this camp robbin', picayune, .22 caliber sneak-thievin' deserves horse whippin'. A man could respect you, Tweed, if you had the guts to hold up a train or a bank like them boys. . . . If you come from town, you got the latest on that Milk River job. There was just enough about it in the papers to tease a man's curiosity. They ketch that son of a snake that murdered Pete Vail?"

This was the first acid test, and Henry Tweed met it as he'd schooled himself to answer such questions. "They ain't got him yet, so far as I know. Like as not he's reached the Hole in the Wall country by now."

HE WAS anxious to get to the bunkhouse where he had left his bed and warsack. He hated to let that warsack with its South America stake out of his sight, but he couldn't go around lugging

the thing with him. And there wasn't a chance in a thousand that any of the cowpunchers at the bunkhouse would go poking into his warsack.

Only a thief opens another man's warbag. But just the same, he'd feel a lot easier when he was there to ride close herd on it. He was glad when old Spud led the way toward the bunkhouse.

There were several cowpunchers in the big log bunkhouse. It was getting dusk, and somebody had lit a big Rochester lamp on the table. Two or three of them greeted Henry Tweed with good natured banter. A couple of them eyed him a little coldly, barely nodding. One of them had worked at the 76 up in Canada when Henry Tweed had been fired for petty stealing up there. The other man had witnessed the whipping that the fiery tempered and hard fighting little hunchbacked nighthawk, Humpy Jack, had given him across the Missouri at the Circle C wagon. They remembered Henry Tweed and showed it. But he had to be thick-skinned about things like that. He'd be glad when he was away from the home ranch and alone at the line camp on Crooked Creek.

"What's the latest, Tweed?" asked a cowpuncher who was re-reading the last newspaper that had reached the ranch. "They ketched that damned skunk that murdered Pete Vail?"

"Not as I know about." Henry Tweed put his tarp-covered bedroll on an empty bunk and with fine carelessness shoved his thick warsack under its head for a pillow, covering it with the blankets and sougans. He took his place near the big stove, his back to its cherry red round belly, and rolled a smoke. He joined in the bitter condemnation of the unknown bank robber who had shot Pete Vail in the back. No man there was more vicious in their damning of the killer than was the loud-mouthed Henry Tweed.

He'd filled a quart bottle from the jug back at the cabin in the badlands. He got it out of his bed and passed it around. The men who had worked for the 76 and the Circle C shook their heads when the bottle was passed their way.

Their refusal burned Henry Tweed with an ugly, sullen anger that he covered badly with a grin. They were representing the Circle C outfit on the south side of the river, it seemed—working with the Two Bar by arrangement, helping feed any Circle C strays that had been missed by the fall round-up which had thrown what Circle C stuff was gathered back across the Missouri onto their home range.

"Seems like I heard," said Tweed when the Circle C reps refused his bottle, "somethin' about how the Circle C wasn't allowin' no more booze at the ranch. But I didn't know that their reps took the pledge before they left home."

"Is that white scar on the off side of your nose the one Humpy Jack put there, Tweed?" drawled one of the Circle C reps. His voice was quiet, dangerous.

Henry Tweed pretended he hadn't heard. His face looked red under its tan and frostbite as he took a big drink. He didn't want a fight now. He needed to stay on. In a day or so he'd be away from the home ranch, safe at the line camp with his South America stake. He passed the bottle to a man he knew loved the stuff too much to let any damn fool notions make him refuse it.

But the implied insult galled him and his loud-mouthed talk was forced.

MORE cowpunchers drifted in, shedding overcoats, kicking off overshoes and chaps. Somebody said the thermometer showed ten below.

"Makes a man think back and wonder what's become of his summer wages," said Henry Tweed. "I'd figgered on roundsidin' in town till the chinook wind

cut the drifts next spring. But a red-headed gal and the wrong poker hands has me shovelin' hay into pore cattle. Wish I had me a job tendin' bar."

"You'd drink up all the profits, Tweed," grinned the 76 man who now repped for the Circle C. He was a young cowpuncher with red hair and a freckled face and was always hoorawing or ribbing somebody. They called him the Sandbur after an incident a few years back when he'd been fired from the Long X for putting sandburs in the wagon boss's saddle blanket. The older hands liked the young cowpuncher, forgave him his practical jokes, and did their utmost to devil him back. Sandbur had that happy faculty for being able to laugh at a joke on himself.

"How would you know, button? Minors ain't allowed in saloons."

"I knowed of a red blanket that wasn't allowed in a bed where it didn't have no business to be. But it got there," chuckled the Sandbur.

"Some day," said Henry Tweed, his big fists doubled, "somebody is goin' to knock your ears down, button."

"That's bin tried, too," grinned the red-headed young cowboy.

The bunkhouse door opened, letting in an icy blast and a flurry of dry snow. A small man, humped a little with cold, came in and kicked the door closed behind him. Tiny brownish icicles hung to his drooping white moustache which was as ragged as his patched coonskin coat and black angora chaps. An old silk muffler was tied down over his battered hat and across his ears. Bright blue eyes twinkled under shaggy brows. His face was seamed, leathery.

Spud Stevens, owner of the Two Bar, greeted the old cowpuncher heartily.

"Long time no see you, Rawhide. What fetches you south of the Missouri?"

"My horse wouldn't face the breeze, Spud, so I had to drift with 'er like a damn tumbleweed. First early bad 'un since the hard winter. The river's froze solid. Too bad this freeze didn't come some hours sooner. We'd have ketched the murderin' son of a snake that shot Pete Vail where his suspenders crossed."

"Since when did you turn bounty-hunter, you damned ol' hoss thief?" chuckled old Spud. "First time I ever heard of you sidin' the law."

"I just about raised young Pete Vail from a pup, Spud. Law, hell! I taken no sides fer ner ag'in' the law. But I thought a heap of little Pete. Hated to see him go to the wild bunch. Hated a damn sight worse to come on him like I done. I found him, Spud, shot in the back, while he was tyin' up a bullet hole in his laig. Looked like he was settin' there, tyin' a string around his bare laig, when this snake up and shot him in the back. Pete never had a chance to even suspicion what was a-comin'. . . ."

The little old cowpuncher cussed the killer as he fumbled with numbed hands at the frogs of his old coonskin coat.

Henry Tweed, his green eyes wary, steadied his voice to a careless, bluff heartiness and held out the bottle that still contained a drink or two.

"This'll warm you up, Rawhide."

The old cowpuncher looked at Henry Tweed. He had to look up because Tweed was an easy ten inches taller. For a long moment those hard blue eyes seemed to look clear through the bigger, younger man.

"Don't think I need one, Tweed. One drink never did me no good. I don't bother with less than a gallon jug." He turned to Spud Stevens.

"How's chances to spend a while here, till the storm blows over and I kin mosey around some?"

"You won't find no warmer welcome in hell, you old rascal. I might even locate a jug. You're the first man stopped here

with fresh news of the bank hold-up. Pete and Fred Jones both worked for me before they got into trouble and turned bad. They never rode a Two Bar horse off that wasn't returned with interest."

OLD RAWHIDE had an audience and made the most of his importance as bearer of interesting tidings. This was range gossip, A1 grade—the sort of news that cowboys devour. Every one of them had known Pete Vail and Fred Jones or at least had almost known the two cowpunchers who had taken to the outlaw trail a few years ago. Old Rawhide, driven by a consuming, white hot rage, was eager to talk. Spud brought a jug from somewhere.

The supper bell interrupted old Rawhide. Then, after supper, when tobacco smoke thickened in the bunkhouse, talk was resumed once more, until old Rawhide was about talked out.

A poker game started. Others lazed on their bunks, half dozing. Spud and Rawhide and a couple of the Two Bar cowpunchers sat in hand-made chairs around the big stove, swapping yarns about outlaws, past and present.

Henry Tweed sat in the poker game until he lost his seventeen dollars. He quit the game and joined the circle around the stove. He was nervous and uncomfortable. Under his breath he cussed old Rawhide, and wished to God he'd put a bullet in the hide of the damned old windjammer when he had him on the far bank of the river a few mornings ago, when Rawhide was testing the rubber ice. That old fool was dangerous.

Henry Tweed was panicky inside. Guilty as hell, he kept wondering if old Rawhide could be suspecting him. Those blue eyes had looked plumb through him, as if they read his thoughts. And he'd refused a drink from Henry Tweed's bottle—likely the first drink that whiskey-guzzling old range-tramp had ever turned down in his life. Old Rawhide was notorious for his love of the stuff. Only for whiskey Rawhide would have been well-fixed like Spud Stevens at the Two Bar, or the Old Gent at the Circle C, or other pioneer cowmen who had settled here in Injun days. . . . And he'd refused to drink from Henry Tweed's bottle.

Why? Because he had the same damned high toned notions as that Circle C rep and the 76 Sandbur? Henry Tweed hoped that was old Rawhide's reason for not taking a drink. And now he was forced back into that circle around the stove. Somehow, he was going to find out just how much that damned old son suspected. He'd watch old Rawhide's every expression as the old coot got more likkered up. And if there was anything in the old rooster's craw, it would come out in whiskey talk.

Henry Tweed found a chair and a place near the stove from where he had a good view of old Rawhide. He found a soft pine stick in the wood box and as Rawhide began some long windy about the Kid Curry gang and Butch Cassidy and the real Wild Bunch, he fished in his pocket for his jack-knife.

It was the pearl handled knife that had belonged to Pete Vail. Dried blood had glued the blades of the knife in their grooves, so that Henry Tweed had a little trouble opening the stuck blade. He broke a thumbnail to the quick and his involuntary grunt had focused the attention of one or two of the others on the stubborn knife blade. Then it opened.

Old Rawhide had noticed, but had not paid much attention. He kept on telling his windy yarn. Henry Tweed rubbed the stained blade along the side of his boot, whetting it carelessly, then started whittling long, thin slivers from the stick of white pine boxwood.

Rawhide wound up his tale with a joke that brought grins and chuckles of amusement. And Spud started on one of his own as the jug made its rounds. It came to Henry Tweed.

"Let's have the loan of your pig-sticker," Tweed," said Rawhide, reaching out a gnarled hand. "It's handier'n mine. I got a splinter run in my hand I want to gouge out."

It was not until the blade had passed out of his possession that it suddenly dawned on Henry Tweed that the knife was the one he had taken from Pete Vail's dead body, and that it had the murdered man's blood on it.

THAT knowledge gave him some moments of suspense. But as the old cowpuncher scowled over his task of prying at the muscle at the base of his left thumb with the sharp point, Tweed relaxed and took a stiff drink.

Inwardly he cursed himself for being such a thick-witted fool as to show a knife that had been the property of the murdered outlaw. Hell, there wasn't a chance in a million that any man there had ever before seen that knife. But he'd have to be careful.

"Thought you was workin' for the Circle Diamond, on Milk River, Tweed?" Rawhide's sharp blue eyes looked up for a moment from his splinter gouging.

"I quit there in September," said Henry Tweed, telling the truth. Then he added the lie to establish an alibi. "I taken my dough and drifted south. I ain't bin north of the Missouri River since September."

Rawhide's keen blue eyes gave him a searching look. Then the old range tramp grunted and went back to his splinter picking. Spud began some anecdote of the cow country and the jug went around the stove, from hand to hand. Henry Tweed took another long pull at the whiskey when it came his turn. He was a little drunk.

The cowpunchers at the poker table had paused to listen to something the Sandbur was telling them in a guarded tone. They grinned, their glances going towards Henry Tweed whose back was to them.

"I wouldn't if I was you, Sandbur," said the other Circle C rep they called Shorty. "Spud wouldn't like it. You bin hittin' the bottle, young 'un. Better go sleep it off."

"I don't like the big yellow-bellied gent," grinned the Sandbur. "He kicked me around some at the 76 wagon. Trouble with you, Shorty, you was raised on sour milk. You got no sense of humor."

"You git into it, young rooster, you'll have to git out of it the best you know how. I'm havin' no part of it."

But there were younger, tipsier Two Bar cowhands who were not averse to listening to the Sandbur's plotting. They gathered in a little group, grinning and whispering.

Shorty and the others went on with their poker game. The group around the stove paid no attention to the rest of the room. They were swapping yarns, arguing now about bronc handling. And Henry Tweed was telling them about a few of the outlawed broncs he had gentled. He was bragging plenty, as was his wont when a little drunk.

CHAPTER THREE

The Death Joke

IT WAS mighty crude humor, somewhat elaborate in the preliminary working up of the climax, as the Sandbur outlined it to his fellow conspirators. Cowboy fun is apt to be that way, but if a man can't stand hoorawing, he'd better quit punching cows. As the Sandbur, a little tipsy, explained, Henry Tweed was getting off easy, and it might cure him, once and for all, of his petty larceny

thieving. He could take it like a good sport, laugh it off, and if he joined in the joke, then it would go a long ways towards getting back his status as a white man. Every man there would accept him as a good sport, and they'd drink from his bottle any time he had one. But if he reared up and fought his head, they'd hooraw him out of camp.

The Sandbur's joke might have whitewashed Henry Tweed of his past petty sins, might have gone off in grand style except for one thing—something the Sandbur had no way of knowing or suspecting. That was the fact that there was twenty thousand dollars of stolen money, blood money, in Henry Tweed's warsack.

At first none of the men sitting around the stove, augering and passing the jug paid any particular attention to the Sandbur and several other cowpunchers who were prowling around the bunkhouse, looking around on the floor, under bunks, behind things. They were lifting and looking under the litter of chaps and overshoes and pack gear and old harness that cluttered the corners of the big bunkhouse.

"It ain't here, Sandbur," some cowboy said, after noisily searching a corner.

"You plumb sure you had it when you come in?" another called, peering with a lighted match into the darkness under a bunk.

"I had it all right," insisted the Sandbur. "I mind I had it in my hand before supper. Laid it right here on the bench by the water bucket when I washed up. But I don't remember pickin' it up. Never give it a thought till somebody asked me the time a minute ago."

"A man that'd pack a gold watch loose in his pocket deserves to lose it."

"I'd had it on a buckskin string that fastened it to the suspender button right above this here watch pocket. Then my gallusses broke, see? And that string was all I had to fix 'em. See here where I used it to fasten my braces to the button? This is the string. . . . But I'd take an oath I laid that watch right here on the bench when I washed up for supper, and forgot to pick it up. Say, are you comical-minded sons of sheepherders tryin' to job me? Come on now, kick through with that turnip. It's a horse on me and I'll buy you boys a drink when we git to town next spring, mebby. You've had your fun, makin' me hunt all over the place for it. Come on, you would-be clowns. I fell fer it. And I ain't huntin' for that watch another minute. Who's got it? I'll rassle you for it if that's what you want."

"Nobody's got your damn watch, Sandbur. Hell, ain't we bin sweatin' and gruntin' as much as you, huntin' the fool thing? You kin search me plumb to the skin. Find it on me and I'll give you my saddle."

"Me, too, Sandbur," said another cowpuncher. "I ain't got your turnip. Look in all your pockets."

"I have," wailed the Sandbur. "It ain't there. A man wouldn't put a watch no place but in his watch pocket. You don't pack an open faced gold watch in your flank pocket to git 'er mashed the first time you set down. I put that watch on the bench. I never picked it up, that's all. Who used the basin after me? Yeah, which one of you jobbin' monkeys was next at the wash basin?" Grinning widely, triumphantly, he looked from one to another.

"Wasn't it Tweed that washed up after you did?" said one of them innocently.

"Yeah," said another. "Henry Tweed come after you. I mind him leavin' the soap in the washpan."

"Shore it was," chimed in another. "Tweed was next at the wash bench."

"Henry Tweed's your huckleberry, young 'un."

"Give the kid his gold watch, Henry!"

"Search him, button!"

"Kick through with the Sandbur's timepiece, big feller."

"It keeps pore time anyhow, Tweed. It ain't worth keepin'."

Henry Tweed's face was a study in red, then white. He got to his feet slowly. He was a little drunk. There was an ugly glitter in his bloodshot green eyes.

"Just what kind of a damned game are you tryin' to play?" he said a little thickly, glaring at the grinning Sandbur.

"A joke's a joke, Henry. The laugh's on me. I want my watch."

"I haven't got your watch. Never saw the damned thing in my life. And what's this talk about me usin' the wash basin after you did? I washed up when I first got in, an hour before supper. What kind of a job are you drunken clowns puttin' up on me, anyhow?"

"Search his warsack, Sandbur. He slipped it in there when he got that bottle from his bed."

"Look in Tweed's warbag, button."

Henry Tweed's face went a sickly grayish color as the grinning Sandbur turned and started for the big man's bunk.

Sweat stood in big beads on Tweed's forehead. He was sick inside, sick with an awful, paralyzing fear. Then the Sandbur reached for the bulky warsack. . . .

HENRY TWEED did not see the grins that spread on the faces of the other cowpunchers. Even old Spud was onto the joke when a Two Bar man nudged him and winked. But Henry Tweed did not see. His slitted green eyes were those of a trapped animal.

Only old Rawhide was not smiling. His puckered blue eyes, hard as steel now, were watching Henry Tweed's face, reading with cold cunning the big man's every changing expression.

Rawhide's seamed, leathery face was set in grim, deeply etched lines. He had pushed back his chair and stood on short bowed legs, the open jack-knife in his left hand. His right hand was edging towards his six-shooter.

The grinning Sandbur jerked the bulky warsack to the edge of the bunk. He fumbled at its leather string.

A horse-croaking, animal-like snarl came from Henry Tweed's dry throat. He jerked his gun as he sprang. His gun barrel thudded down across the Sandbur's arm, breaking it like a dry stick. The Sandbur backed off swearing. Then the gun swung to cover the others as Tweed grabbed the warsack in his left hand.

"I'll kill the man that makes a move," he snarled. "Hands up, you skunks!"

Men were lifting their hands. Most of them were unarmed, their six-shooters laid aside on their bunks.

"Hold on!" old Spud was saying. "That's enough of this damfoolery. Put up that six-shooter, Tweed."

The Sandbur stood holding his broken arm, his face a little white. Nobody was smiling now. Old Spud's voice cut through the heavy silence like a bucksaw.

"Put up that gun, Tweed, before somebody makes you eat it. The kid never owned a watch in his life. Can't you see they've bin jobbin' you? Nobody wants to look in your damned warsack."

"I wouldn't be so dead certain about that, Spud," said old Rawhide who stepped out from behind the stove, his hand on his gun. His puckered blue eyes were looking at Henry Tweed.

"This here knife I borrowed off you, Tweed," he said slowly, "is the same one I gave Pete Vail about ten days ago when I happened to meet him and Fred Jones at the edge of the badlands. The knife wasn't on Pete's dead body when I found him murdered. You claim you ain't bin north of the Missouri since September. This is November. I reckon I know what you got in that warsack."

Spud and one or two others had backed out of line. Rawhide's gun was still in its holster when Henry Tweed fired. But booze and jumpy nerves spoiled his aim. The heavy lead slug tore the stove door off one hinge.

Old Rawhide, crouched and bent a little forward on his skinny, bowed legs, was shooting. The old cedar-handled six-shooter in his clawlike hand was belching orange flame through the powdersmoke.

The crash of gunfire was deafening in the room. Rawhide's first bullet had caught Tweed in the middle somewhere, and he sagged like an empty sack to his knees. His jaw had dropped and blood was coming from his gaping mouth in a frothy, slobbering stream. His slitted green eyes showed through the smoky lamplight. The bulky warsack was on the floor in front of him.

Tweed knelt there, trying with his ebbing strength to cock the six-shooter he was holding in both hands. Then old Rawhide's gun jerked out another streak of fire. Henry Tweed's head stiffened a little, then dropped forward.

One of Tweed's bullets had torn the old range tramp's face. He walked across the floor and stood over the dead man. Tweed's lead-gray face with its gaping, blood-filled mouth lay sideways on the warsack that held his South America stake. Rawhide spat a mixture of blood and tobacco juice down at the board floor. Then he turned away.

Rawhide still held the open jack-knife in his left hand. He looked at it, his blue eyes bright as winter stars. His tight-lipped mouth pulled faintly under the ragged gray moustache as he snapped the blade shut and shoved the knife in his pocket. Then he ejected the two empty shells from his six-shooter and reloaded the empty chambers with cartridges he took from his sagging belt.

"You know, Spud," he said as he reached for the whiskey, "the chances are that murderin' snake would have got away with it, only his sneak-thief ways tripped him up."

And that was about all old Rawhide was ever heard to say about the killing of Henry Tweed.

But a pilgrim stopping over a long winter's night at the Two Bar ranch, might have gotten the tale from Old Spud Stevens if Spud just happened to be in the right mood. Spud tells it, beginning at the end, going at it slowly, like he'd edge a big native steer out of a herd.

"Some day, I reckon," he'll start lazily, pointing with the soft pine stick he's whittling, "the blacksmith will git around to fixin' that hinge on the stove door. Feller named Henry Tweed busted it one night a few years back. Busted it with a bullet. . . ."

THE END

For excitement and adventure and pulse-quickening drama in the savage, strife-torn setting of the Virginia City of the 'Sixties—for vibrant romance and the brave, clean love of a frontier woman caught in the crossfire of certain death—for the gripping story of courage at a gold-mine outpost, when rebellion against the Union armed the savage hordes with killer irons. . . . Read Harry F. Olmsted's great new feature-length novel in the March issue of ACE-HIGH—

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Two Town Tamers—

Stirring frontier novelette of a rawhide badge-toter, too tough to die!

Small wonder that townsmen along the rawhide frontier looked up to Shanghai Hickson, straight-shooting, free-lance marshal, as much as gun-handy crooks and tinhorn politicians feared him. Yet men swore that in Smoky Hill he sold his guns for Judas gold—to champion the lawless riff-raff which he had sworn to send on a one-way boothill treck!

AT NINE o'clock that soft June evening, Shanghai Hickson idled along Salina's main street, savoring a long cigar and the fact that after a decade of violence at last he was at peace with the world. Behind him lay a trail dotted with towns that were only shells of their former wildness; with the ghosts of

One Town!

By Harry F. Olmsted

(Author of "A Feudist Comes Home to Die," etc.)

accomplished gunfighters who had challenged, lost and died; with the fires of vengeance that had burned themselves out against the Hickson six-shooter draw.

He had left no threat behind him, nor did there seem to be any danger, waiting and ready before him, as he had known it in the past. And that alone was cause for profound speculation. Sod busters were fencing off the prairies and turning the roots to the sun. The longhorn hordes from Texas were tapering off; the wild bloods were moving west or becoming reconciled to the mandates of civil law. There seemed no niche for a town tamer, and that indisputable fact sent a pang through Shanghai Hickson's big heart. His work was done, and already men were forgetting.

Shanghai turned into a saloon for his usual drink before retiring. Just inside the door he came face to face with two men, both strangers to him. But one of them said: "Mister Hickson, sir! I'm John Caldwell, the postmaster. You don't know me, but I have reason for wanting to know you...." He hesitated, obviously embarrassed, then indicated his friend

—a frank-eyed little man with a grin entirely free of guile. "My friend, Tom Chappell, Mister Hickson."

"Just the man I want to meet," enthused Chappell. "Sir, I will be happy to buy the drinks if you'll give me a few minutes of your time."

"Fair enough," nodded Shanghai, and followed them to a table.

There, Tom Chappell drew a letter from his pocket and said: "Mister Hickson, I know all about your reputation and am taking advantage of it now to put in a word for my brother. I practice law here in Salina. My brother, Wane Chappell, is a lawyer, and mayor of Smoky Hill, two hundred miles west. He says in this letter that they've lost three marshals in two months. A bad element controls the town, headed by the renegade, John Dishawn, and law-abiding folks are helpless. He has asked me to try to contact one of the better known marshals—Shanghai Hickson, Wyatt Earp, Pat Shugrue or Mysterious Billy Smith. Strange that the day this letter arrives I should meet the man that heads that list. He says they will pay five hundred a month to make the law effective, two hundred a month permanently. Are you in a position to be interested?"

For a moment the Town Tamer's eyes gazed at the letter in the lawyer's hand, as if probing what was written there. He said, "You know, Mister Chappell, I make no habit of chasing will-of-the-wisps. In the absence of a direct offer from the town council. . . ."

"You will encounter no difficulty, I assure you," broke in the lawyer. "I know my brother. And if, for any reason, he is unable to pay you, I personally guarantee you one hundred dollars and expenses for making the ride. Satisfactory?"

The Town Tamer nodded and got up from his chair. "Very well. And because these things sometimes hang upon a matter of minutes, I'll be on my way to Smoky Hill at once."

There was something in his frosty blue eyes in that moment that commanded at once their admiration and their awe. They stood there silently as they watched him stride from the room and into the night.

THUS it happened that five days later, Shanghai Hickson rode into Smoky Hill a little after nightfall and put up at the stable. Prairie dust lay like gray gunpowder on his clothes and his pony. Yet other than a slight stiffness as he dismounted, he showed no evidence of fatigue.

After his horse had been watered, fed and stabled, he slung his saddle bags across his arm, and sallied onto the street in search of a hotel. The town, he noted with interest, was quiet—unduly so.

Striding into the lobby of the town's one unimposing hostelry, he approached the clerk. He said: "I believe I shall need a room. I'll know definitely when I talk with one of your fellow townsmen. Please keep my bags until I return."

"Certainly," smiled the clerk. "You're a stranger to Smoky Hill, and maybe I can help you locate the men you want."

"Where might I find Mister Wane Chappell?"

The clerk's eyes widened, and for a moment fear touched him. "What—why do you want him. I—"

The Town Tamer's reply was tinged with stolid humor: "A peaceful meeting, my friend. I hold him no ill will. If you doubt it...."

"Not at all," said the clerk. "Wane Chappell is our mayor. Right now he's at the council meeting in the town hall. This side of the street and west about a dozen doors."

Shanghai left the clerk who stared at his broad back with admiration and won-

der at seeing such a magnificent physical specimen.

The greatest of prairie marshals was crowding forty. He stood well over six feet, carried his two hundred pounds with the action of a panther, moving with a free and easy swing. From beneath his wide hat depended a mane of tawny hair, worn to his square shoulders after the manner of the frontier. His strong features were set off by piercing blue eyes and a pale mustache skirting his stern mouth. A picturesque man who seemed to radiate danger.

No one noticed him as he moved silently into the dark portal of the council chamber to take a seat at the rear of the crowded hall. All eyes were on the council table, where Councilman Cato Champion was saying. "You've all heard the talk that's going around. Everybody's saying that Smoky Hill is becoming the devil's playground, that crime and violence and lawlessness has the town by the throat. What's wrong with the town, people are asking. I'll tell you what is wrong. We're wrong! The five of us who sit at this table. We had a marshal shot right out from under us, and what did we do? We appointed another home guard and pinned the badge on him. That was a death sentence, as you all know. A nice fellow, but about as capable to administer law as I am. And to make it worse, we did the same thing over again. We've had three nice funerals, and the lawless element has fattened its strength to just that extent. . . ."

He paused impressively. From the head of the table a man who startlingly resembled Salina's Tom Chappell spoke up. He said: "You talk large and impressive, Cato. But what does it add up to?"

"This," said Champion. "We're representing the people. . . . and letting them down. During the last week I've heard men saying that I'm tied up with this wave of crime. . . . that we're all getting our cut. I don't blame folks for that kind of talk. It must look that way from the outside.

"I have learned today that down at Fort Wallace, not twenty-five miles west, there's one of the mightiest marshals the prairies have ever developed. A man whose reputation will drive half the killers, tinhorns and thieves from our midst. His gun will take care of the rest. "Gentlemen—I offer you the services of the greatest of all lawmen. He'll cost us five hundred dollars a month and be cheap at twice the price. He is known along the cattle trails as—Shanghai Hickson!"

The words seemed to roll through the assemblage in a fluid whisper. And to none was the pronouncement more startling than to Shanghai himself. He lifted his heavy chin from his chest and started. His changeless face reflected none of his interest in the stated fact that he was in Fort Wallace—eager and willing to tame Smoky Hill for five hundred dollars a month! Avidly, he listened to the spirited discussion, and to the unanimous vote that appointed him marshal, effective the following evening. And right then he forsaw what, perhaps, was in store on the morrow.

Moving like a shadow, a grim, half amused expression in his eyes the Town Tamer rose and left the hall. Outside the door, he paused to look along the street. Down the walk a light splashed from a dusty window, illuminating the red and white stripings of a barber pole. Shanghai walked studiously toward it, plainly conscious that there was more than average hostility in these closely crowded buildings. It challenged him, yet so direct was that greater challenge he had just looked in upon, it stirred no resentment in him. He rubbed his stubbled jaw pensively as he turned into the barber shop.

Shanghai drew off his broadcloth coat,

removed his Windsor tie and laid back his collar. With his finger tips, he lifted his locks. With heavy regret in his tone, he said: "Take off the hair and crop the mustache."

Prattling volubly of the evil days that had fallen upon Smoky Hill, the barber swapped shears for lather and razor and quickly finished his job. Shanghai paid him and when he had donned coat and tie, looked at himself in the glass. For a moment sullen rebellion flamed in his eyes. Then it was gone as he strode into the night.

At the hotel he smiled thinly that the pleasant clerk found him an entire stranger. In bold strokes, he signed the register, "William Marshall," and went up a flight of complaining stairs to his bed.

CHAPTER TWO

The Second Town Tamer

SHANGHAI rose late the next morning, ate breakfast, then spent the morning circulating about town, jotting down in his orderly brain the arrangement of streets and alleyways, saloons, gaming resorts and other less spectacular places of business. During the afternoon, he sat in an easy chair on the shaded veranda of the hotel, watching the ebb and flow of business, his body idle, his eyes seemingly unnoticing. Thus, from high noon to sunset he lived through perhaps the longest calm Smoky Hill had known since its shackling frame buildings mushroomed beside the westering rails. The magic of a great name was working its leaven in the populace.

A welcome coolness lifted from the bottom lands and the sunset sky burned riotously with orange and red when three riders came racing across the river bridge. They came swiftly, turning violently into the main stem.

Tinted light struck the foremost of the three, accentuating the rapacious turn of his boldy acquiline features, his drooping blond mustache and the wealth of corn-colored hair billowing out behind him. Tall and straight and commanding, he sat his horse, his heavy jaws tightened and an innate arrogance oozing from his stern-set face.

A high rebel yell fell from the lips of one of his companions as the three of them curbed showily before the Champion Saloon. The yell fetched men streaming along the street.

Rolling his cigar in his fingers, Shanghai Hickson stared across the intervening space with a sharp and curious glance. It was his stock in trade to know men. And as he watched this new arrival dismount and grasp Cato Champion's hand, he knew that here was a man with more than merely the empty cloak of a borrowed reputation. There were certain other signs, indubitable and sinister.

The man's twin pearl-handled weapons were properly worn. In his carriage was a deadly readiness that betokened his experience. His hawk-like eyes were darting and wary and he made shift to put his back to a solid wall. These things the Town Tamer saw and was impressed. He had never seen this man who called himself Shanghai Hickson, nor had he the slightest idea who he might be.

Shanghai didn't move from his seat as this pseudo town tamer was publicly proclaimed marshal and adorned with the badge of office. To his ears came Cato Champion's flowery speech of appointment and Wane Chappell's glowing tribute to the man who had tamed Abilene and Hays and other outposts along the Chisholm Trail.

With unsmiling reserve, the new marshal responded with well chosen remarks, concluding with the confident boast. "... an' when Shanghai Hickson moves in, gents, the lawless move out. Preferably vertical; horizontal if they insist. Please

be assured that whatever I am forced to do will be in the best interests of the town I serve. Thank you all."

For the next few hours there was a round of the saloons, with the town turning to red liquor by way of celebrating its good fortune in securing the services of a great man. The Town Tamer mingled with the throng, unnoticed in the general adulation of the mighty gun-marshal who was honoring Smoky Hill by accepting their five hundred per month.

The hour neared midnight and enthusiasm was commencing to give way before weariness. Smiling thinly to himself, Shanghai walked out onto the street and turned his steps toward the hotel.

The full moon hung high in the heavens and through its pallid glow, the Town Tamer beheld a cavalcade of horsemen cantering easily across the bridge. The hollow clatter of their hoofbeats giving scant warning of their coming.

Shanghai pressed into deep shadow, watching. The riders swept along the main street, the echo of a ribald laugh lifting from their midst. In the center of the thorofare they paused, their stocky leader a horse length ahead and facing the Champion Saloon. The revealing moonlight betrayed the scornful smile upon his round face. His heavy voice knifed startlingly through the muting murmur of the town.

"Who said Shanghai Hickson could tame Smoky Hill? Come out, Tinbadge, an' le's see how much wider you are across the pants than them that went before yuh! What does that great gun rep weigh?"

The half dozen at his back vented a wild and reckless yell. Their guns ran red ribbons of flame and their lead crashed through a window of the Champion Saloon, fetching the glass down in shards. It brought an instant hush to the town and into that hush swelled the harsh, impatient voice of the challenging rider.

"Come out, Shanghai! Come out and warm yore iron!"

Momentary silence, with those seven horsemen shifting restlessly. Then, from a dark slot between buildings, came a harsh command: "Lift yore hands, Jake Dishawn! Call upon Heaven to witness that yo're willin' to spend the night in Smoky Hill's jailhouse!"

Horses reared in the midst of that cavalcade. Crimson tongues of flame licked toward that gloom-shrouded voice. The blast of lead shuddered through the town, the echoes rolling along the false fronts.

From the shadows came answering bursts of muzzle flame. One of the riders cried out, folded over his horn. Then, with no effort to make a fight of it, the invaders were hanging low, spurring along the street. And the tall, tawny figure of the pseudo town tamer was walking unhurriedly into the open, two guns blazing at his hips.

The echoes died and the street was a-riot with trampling men who hailed this first exploit of the new marshal. But Shanghai Hickson, having observed the angle of the pretender's fire, shrugged, smiled thinly and walked leisurely to the hotel.

To himself he said: "A pretty show and a brave act. Let the show go on. Shanghai Hickson is the duly appointed marshal of Smoky Hill, but Jake Dishawn and his wild ones don't know it—yet."

He tossed his cigar away, climbed the stairs to his room, wondering how long it would be and what tragic events might transpire before they pinned the badge upon a broader breast.

At ten o'clock the next morning, Shanghai Hickson emerged from the restaurant with a good cigar screwed into the corner of his wide mouth. With lazy deliberation, he took up his patrol of the town, just as he had patroled other wild

towns in the days that were gone. He was just as determined to tame Smoky Hill as if it had been he whom the populace had hailed and endowed with authority.

Twice in his meanderings he passed the imposter who also policed the town. Twice his eyes locked those of the other and twice he saw shadows of aroused interest there. An icy stream touched his nerves each time. The man was as tall as Shanghai and about him was a sense of swiftness, of abiding faith in his ability to take care of himself. As the man's probing glance whipped him that second time, the Town Tamer reacted to the warning that the man had penetrated his disguise, that he knew.

He was conscious of the impact of the man's gaze after he had passed and cloudiness touched the Town Tamer's blue eyes. If this imposter recognized him, by any chance, the least Shanghai could expect would be an assassin's bullet from some dark corner. If he called the man out and met his master—the inevitable fate of those who cling to guns,—the name of Shanghai Hickson would be dragged down to dishonor by a clever renegade. He must kill this man; the situation allowed of no alternative. Shanghai Hickson had been appointed marshal; now he would *be* marshal!

IT WAS mid-afternoon when the disturbance started in the Prairie Saloon, across the street from Champion's place. High-pitched, angry voices preceded a shot, a bawl of rage and the crash of man conflict. An aproned bartender came sprinting through the slat doors, howling for help.

"Marshal! Where's the marshal? Where's Shanghai Hickson?"

From where he stood in the awning shade, the Town Tamer could see the pretender bellied up to Cato Champion's bar, nor did he move as the bawling for help continued, save to cock his head and laugh with the rest. So Shanghai didn't tarry. With long strides, he hurried to the frightened barman.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

But the bartender only let out another squawk for Shanghai Hickson.

The Town Tamer stepped around him, shoved into the cool bar-room. Two men were struggling upon the floor. The one underneath was striking and kicking. The man astride him was handing out an artistic pistol whipping. By the collar of his coat, Shanghai lifted the aggressor from his victim.

With a curse, the man swung his gun. Shanghai chopped down upon his wrist, numbing it. The man held to the trigger guard with one finger, and thus the frontier marshal carried him to the door, heaved him past the staring barkeep. The man lit heavily in the dust of the street.

Shanghai was dusting off his hands when the fellow arose, cursing and leaping for his fallen weapon. Then, seeing Shanghai's hard eyes on him, the man hesitated before palming the grounded revolver. The Town Tamer said: "Pick it up! It's all right. Any way you want it is satisfactory."

The man's anger cooled. Gingerly, with thumb and forefinger, he picked up his weapon and dropped it into holster as if it were very, very hot. Then he ran hurriedly across the street and popped into the Champion bar.

From within the Prairie Saloon came the man who had been on the losing end of the bar-room brawl. He came to Shanghai with outstretched hand. He said: "I'm obliged to you, sir. You saved me a tough time with one of Cato Champion's plug-uglies. I'm Matt Henning, owner of this place. To whom am I indebted?"

Shanghai took his hand. "Glad to know

you, Henning," he murmured. "I'm William Marshall, and I think I can promise you some relief from across the way. Good day."

He stepped off the walk, heading across the street.

Shanghai's entry brought an instant hush to the Champion bar-room. Every eye was upon him as he strode unhurriedly toward the bar-end where Cato Champion and the newly appointed marshal stood with the man Shanghai had just thrown from the Prairie Saloon.

The Town Tamer walked deliberately up to face them, his insistent glance upon the imposter. Emotionless he said, "What kind of a lawman are you? You were rods closer to this bit of trouble than I was. They were calling upon you for help. I've listened to many criticisms of the great Shanghai Hickson; but neglect of his sworn duty wasn't one of them. Or have you a special reason for making war on Matt Henning?"

The pretender's tawny eyes darkened. "My friend," he murmured, "you don't look just like a pilgrim. But just in case you are, let me say you're takin' the very best way I know of gettin' yoreself killed."

A thin smile splashed across the Town Tamer's lips. He said, softly: "I take a lot of killing, Hickson."

It was a challenge, and to the watchers there was a very definite stiffening of the two tall forms. Facing each other, they were strangely alike, yet differing as a rushing tide differs from the fluid death behind a weakening dam. The imposter studied Shanghai's frozen face, those chill penetrating eyes. His own glance shifted and he wrestled with doubt. He said boldly: "And I can dish out a better mess of the same, as anyone can tell you."

"Just a minute, Shanghai!" broke in Cato Champion, and then to the Town Tamer: "Who the hell are you, stranger? What you mean by interfering here?"

Shanghai's glance was narrow. He said: "Judging by the fiasco last night and the lack of action on the part of this great man, it's every man for himself and the devil take the laggard. From here forward, I will do my own marshaling."

He turned away and the imposter's flat, deadly voice followed him. "You leave Smoky Hill to me, if you want to die in bed."

TWO DOORS down, Shanghai turned into the General Store and ordered a box of .44 cartridges. He said: "I notice some packing boxes behind the store. I'll be obliged if you allow me to use one as a target."

"Help yourself," grinned the store keeper.

Five minutes later the customers of the Champion Saloon and Cato Champion himself were moving out the rear in answer to the measured blasting of Colt's guns. There they found the Town Tamer slamming slugs into a packing box upon which he had penciled rude stars with the word "Marshal" scrawled in each. One by one he drilled those five-pointed designs. Shooting with either hand and from the hip, taking care never to empty both guns before reloading. It was an exhibition that drew "Oh's" and "Ah's," from the watchers, and, Shanghai noted, a look of amazement in the face of Cato Champion. But the councilman said nothing when the exhibition was over.

An hour later a stolid-faced small boy found Shanghai and told him that Cato Champion desired him in the saloon office. Shanghai went. The smug politician was gallantly cordial. "Sit," he commanded, and produced cigars. "Just what is your game in Smoky Hill?"

"Let's make it a personal confession meeting," smiled the Town Tamer. "You

tell me what your game is and I'll answer your question."

"Fair enough," allowed the councilman, and he seemed to find high humor in the idea. "I liked your work out back. A nice bit of shooting, and this time it will have paid you to advertise. I'm not in this town for my health. I've got a fine thing here and I always protect my fences. How would you like to be deputy to the great Shanghai Hickson—at two hundred a month?"

Shanghai stared into his eyes until the man grew restive and the silence oppressive. "Not interested. I couldn't even entertain the proposition of making that big four flusher my deputy. There's fear in his eyes, and right and truth are not in him. No thanks."

The saloonman-politician was surprised, but insistent: "Of course you're wrong—But I'm not concerned with what you think of him. I can use that gun hand of yours. I will offer you the same money as—as, well let us say my bodyguard. Protecting my interests, you understand? Watching my games and preventing interference with my rights. What do you say?"

"I'll need to think that over, Champion, and let you know—say, day after tomorrow, sometime."

Shanghai took his leave, moving down to the station to see the evening train pull in from the east. One passenger got off. He was a fine looking, pantherish man, handsome of face, hardly middle aged and a gambler from the reckless glitter of his dark eyes to the tips of his long, expressive fingers.

Stepping down from the car step, he surveyed the assemblage on the station platform with good humored interest. And thus his glance fell athwart the broad form of the Town Tamer. For an instant their glances locked. Shanghai's jaws tightened but by no other sign did he betray that here was Whiplash Nagle—honest gambler and one of the best who ever set up a spread beside the Chisholm Trail.

Nagle's eyes narrowed, then widened. He looked quickly away, his brow furrowed with thought. Then he took another look. A slow smile broke over his handsome face and he stalked brazenly over to face the Town Tamer. There was friendly courtesy about him.

"Shanghai Hickson!" he said in a gentle voice. "Another prairie hell-town knows its master. I'm proud. . . ."

"You must be mistaken," murmured the Town Tamer and his eyes changed slightly.

The gambler smiled and said: "It's no use, Shanghai. The barber's work is no disguise to those who know you. Why'd you have it done?"

Shanghai stared at the man with no visible emotion. He said: "Oh . . . the hair and mustache? Those, my friend, are adorning our brave marshal, Shanghai Hickson. Look." He nodded toward the main street, where the imposter strode hurriedly with Cato Champion. "Yonder he comes, like a commanding lion. . . ."

"Oh!" grinned Whiplash Nagle, staring. "I see. Of course. Strange I should have made so glaring a mistake. Your town, I would say, is in capable hands, Mister—Mister—"

"Marshall!" filled in the Town Tamer, tonelessly. "William Marshall!"

"Marshall!" echoed the gambler, and chuckled tonelessly at his old friend. "Glad to know you. I'm Whiplash Nagle. I come to Smoky Hill following the trail of a tinhorn who cold-decked me out of three thousand dollars. He happens to be dealing now for one Cato Champion, in the Champion saloon. It's a real pleasure to know that my fears of bucking a gun-

trap are groundless—with the great Shanghai Hickson within call."

They bowed gravely, and the gambler strode toward the hotel. The Town Tamer did not stir. He stood very solid against the westering sun, staring after Nagle with enigmatic eyes. He saw him pass the imposter, fling him a chill look and walk on with no sign of recognition in the eyes of either. Shanghai shook with a scornful chuckle. His disguise had been easily penetrated. It is hard to fool a gambler.

How much of a gambler was the imposter? Did he already suspect? And, if so, when and where would he strike?

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Masquerade

ON THE wings of excitement, word went out that a stranger was bucking Cato Champion's poker spread. Straight stud, the sky the limit, and dog eat dog. The stranger apparently loaded with yellow-back bills, was winning. Business languished elsewhere as men crowded into the Champion Saloon to watch the play.

When Shanghai Hickson entered the Champion Saloon after supper, Nagle was playing with a chill intensity and astounding successs. He had won thousands. His Colt Peacemaker lay beside his huge pile of chips. The gaunt-faced houseman played with grim desperation, mopping sweat and glancing occasionally at those behind Nagle as if to intercept some helpful hint. And still he lost.

Shanghai watched for a spell, then walked to the bar to sip a drink. He knew how that play would go because he knew Nagle and his luck. What he was more interested in was the handsome gambler's fate.

As Shanghai had suspected, Champion came to him—his face pale and jerking. He splashed and gulped a long drink and his gaze clung to Nagel, then shifted to Shanghai's pale eyes. He said: "He cheats! But he's clever—damnably clever. If we can't shear him, Marshall, he'll never get out of here with his winnings."

"I judge," murmured the Town Tamer, cryptically. "It's an old and ugly game. But why tell me?"

Champion said in a low, flat tone: "I'll have a disturbance started to attract attention. Twenty witnesses will swear that he drew on you. And the five hundred dollars you'll take out of his winnings will buy lots of cartridges . . . ."

Hatred for the crooked politico swelled within Shanghai Hickson. How well he knew this kind! In a monotone he said: "Interesting, Champion. I'll consider it and let you know in a day or two."

Cato Champion changed. His face grew icy and behind its chill a silent deadliness appeared. "In Smoky Hill," he said curtly, "a man is either for me or against me. There's no in-between ground, no call for study. I see no fear in you, so it must be that you bank large on your luck. And luck has a way of running out . . . ."

"I expected that, Champion."

"All right!" Cato Champion turned on his heel. "We understand each other, Marshall. With the best in your grasp, you've deliberately chosen the worst."

"I expect the worst!" snapped Shanghai, and his eyes were full of smouldering fire. "If I harvest more, I'm surprised—pleasantly."

Shanghai watched him stride again into the throng about the table. Posted against the bar, his cold eyes lancing to all corners of the place, he awaited what his experience and heavy cynicism told him was certain to happen.

Over at the gaming table, Whiplash Nagle broke the bank. At Cato Champion's order more money was fetched from the iron safe and the game went on. The square gambler's luck was riding

high and he was playing it heavy—right up to the inevitable break. Champion was as nervous as a serpent's tongue, and Shanghai was more interested in his reactions than in the buzz of excitement around the game.

Thus he saw the saloonman call one of his bartenders, whisper briefly in his ear and send the man out the rear. So, two hours later, he was not surprised when a thunder of hoofs sounded outside and a man came crashing through the door with the shouted warning: "It's Jake Dishawn an' his wild bunch!"

THERE was an immediate scattering of the crowd about the gambling table where two men were unconscious to all but the cards. A low murmur of voices came from outside and the heavy rumble of bootsteps. Through the doorway came the squat, arrogant figure Shanghai had seen sweep from town in a hail of lead the night before. At his back were a dozen hard bitten youngsters, booted and spurred and gun-hung. And through the door behind them came the man Shanghai knew as Wane Chappell, the mayor.

He was grim and scowling as he signaled Cato Champion. Cato, in his turn, nodded and flashed a meaningful glance into the crowd. And then, from some point at the rear, the marshal of Smoky Hill came angling to the bar, his pale eyes fixed upon the broad form of Jake Dishawn.

"So you're Dishawn, the curly wolf of these plains!" the bogus Hickson said. "Last night you called me out, my friend, and when I came you ran away. You have gall to come back. I'll have to spur the salt out of your carcass, Dishawn. No man living can come into my town and raise hell."

"No offense, Hickson," mumbled the renegade leader humbly. "We was full uh bad likker an' crazy as snakes in a hot skillet. You won't have no trouble with us an' you an' me—we ain't got no fight, Marshal."

"Spoke like a man," smiled the imposter. "You better mean it. Last night you shot out a few windows. Champion, what will the damage come to?"

"Ten dollars ought to cover it," the saloonman replied.

Dishawn nodded, tossed a bill to the bar, invited the marshal up to drink. Tension relaxed and Shanghai Hickson's hard amusement deepened.

Whiplash Nagle still won with monotonous regularity. Cato Champion's nervousness grew. At ten o'clock he washed his hands, dried them very carefully, removed his coat, broke open a new pack of cards and walked over to replace his losing houseman. As the sweating, uncomfortable tinhorn rose from his seat, Whiplash Nagle rose also.

"I've won enough," he said. "Cash me in."

"What?" yelped Champion, starting. "You mean you're not giving the house a chance to get even?"

"I'm not interested in the house," responded Nagle icily. "I'm interested only in busting this houseman of yours. If he stays, I stay. If he quits, I quit."

Speechless and baffled, Champion stared at the square gambler as he stacked his loose chips. Dishawn and his men had strolled over to the game to elbow spectators aside until they stood banked behind Nagle. Mayor Wane Chappel stood near them, scowling and preoccupied. In deep shadow, down in the corner of the barroom, the man who called himself Shanghai Hickson stood immobile, his chill eyes watching every movement.

Hard upon the last words of Whiplash Nagel's, the window beside the imposter crashed inward from a blow from outside. Quick as a flash, the town marshal whirled and drew. He bawled: "No you

don't . . . !" And filled the hole in the pane with lead.

With a gasp, the crowd whirled to stare. And behind Nagle, one of Dishawn's men stabbed for his gun. Light struck off the blued barrel of Shanghai Hickson's weapon as it flashed from its sheath and his quick, sharp voice knifed the momentary silence:

"Watch out, Nagle!"

His pistol flamed, filling the room with detonating concussion. The assassin who menaced the square gambler stiffened, dropped his gun and fell, screaming and clawing at a broken shoulder. Dishawn and his men, startled and angered by resistance from an unexpected angle, whipped out their weapons. Drawing, whirling and firing all in a massed explosion of effort. But they found no target awaiting them. Shanghai Hickson had faded into one of the booths, was hidden there in the deep gloom as the bar-end lamp was snuffed by gun-concussion.

Out of that gloom ran the thin streaks from the guns that had echoed along the Chisholm Trail. One of the renegades cried out faintly, stumbled forward and slid to his face. A second shuddered, held himself erect by every exercise of a fogging will and shuddered again as the Town Tamer's lead sheared through him.

The customers, inspired with terror, went out the rear, through the windows or threw themselves flat upon the floor. Their milling in the background kept Shanghai from turning his fire upon Dishawn, but he dropped two more before the deadliness of his gun work struck through to the whiskey-inflamed brains of the renegades. As if from command, they floored their empty guns and flung up their hands. And from the gloom the echoless monotone of the Town Tamer struck.

"You were bucking my game, fools. Walk out the front, get on your ponies and don't come back!"

There was no hesitation. They went so hurriedly that they jammed in the doorway. And, an instant later, the roar of hoofbeats attested their swift departure to the west. Those in the barroom stood frozen in their tracks, awed and speechless. Five men were on the floor—two dead and three desperately wounded!

Now the savage voice of the one they knew as William Marshall broke the stillness: "Nagle, cash your chips and leave. My sorrel is in the feed barn. Take him and ride east. Dishawn rode west. No—don't stop to argue. You can settle for the horse later . . . ."

Nagle was smiling as he moved to the bar to cash in. He was still smiling as he went out the door, into the night.

Cato Champion was first to recover his poise. "Hickson," he rapped, in displeasure. "What were you doing through all of this butcher's work. You know what you were hired for. Do it! Take him if you can; kill him if you must. But get him—before he cleans out the town!"

The marshal stood with gun hanging at his side. His face was gray. But in unquestioning subservience to the will of the politician to whom he owed allegiance, he moved slowly toward the booth.

As he neared the booth, he spoke: "Come out, Marshall! You've had your dance, now there's the fiddler to pay. You may kill me and more after me, but you can't get away. You're under arrest. Submit peaceful or . . . ."

No sound came from the dark booth. A breath of cool air struck into the barroom, stirring the last wisps of the gunsmoke that lingered there. The imposter stepped briskly ahead, whirled back to the staring spectators. He said, with every inflection of mighty relief: "He's gone! Out the window!"

And the spirit of the manhunt died in the memory of that awful gunplay.

IT WAS very late the next forenoon when Shanghai Hickson came down the hotel stairs to surprise a horrified look upon the clerk's face. With massive unconcern, he passed to the street, entered a restaurant and ate a hearty breakfast. He seemed quite indifferent to the way the street cleared at his appearance. Yet a careful observer might have noticed the sharp stiffness of his stride, the short swing of his arms and the chill, ironic smile upon his lips.

No one spoke to him, no one offered him harm. In the rigid social classification of the frontier, he was now a little lower in the scale than more subtle killers like Jake Dishawn. But this isolation bounced off his stern exterior as from granite. He was used to it.

After breakfast, with high noon only a half hour away, the Town Tamer moved to an easy chair on the hotel porch, there to savor his cigar and to weigh the temper of this town he was marshaling in fact, as well as name. He had relaxed there for something more than an hour when the imposter emerged from the Champion Saloon and angled across the dusty street toward him. A whisper ran along the walks and men came to the doorways to watch.

Legs pumping stiffly, the pseudo-town tamer came over to plant himself before the stolid man on the veranda. He spoke loudly: "Marshall, I'm putting you under arrest!"

Shanghai stirred with quick irritation and his fingers flexed over the grip of his guns. He said: "For what?"

"For the murder of four men in the Champion Saloon last night. Maybe five, if another dies."

The ferment within Shanghai drew him straighter in his seat. His wary eyes took stock of the glinting rifle barrels, aimed directly at him, that protruded across a number of sills.

"Hickson, I'm not letting you arrest me today," Shanghai said softly. "Maybe tomorrow; maybe not at all. I'll let you know—in a day or two."

"There'll be no day or two for you, Marshall. I'm a fair man. I'll give you all the chance that's reasonable. But I'm putting you in jail—or killing you!"

A slow flush touched Shanghai's cheeks. "Hickson," he murmured, "you learn slowly. Didn't I make it plain what happens when men play at the game of a master? Your play last night was crude. What blood was spilled is on your head. Follow the fool lead of Cato Champion long enough, and you'll die!"

"Sure of yourself, eh Marshall?"

"Guns are my trade, Hickson. No man lives who can face me with guns and expect to come through. The guns of the townsmen are on me, but none of them can kill me quick enough to save you."

The imposter studied that frozen face and the blue, unreadable eyes. Doubt was reflected upon his furrowed forehead. After an uncomfortable pause, he said loudly: "Maybe, as you imply, those men were pointing at the tinhorn gambler. I care nothing about their fate. But no man can tree Smoky Hill while I'm its marshall. I'll give you till sundown to leave. If you stay, I'll kill you."

He turned abruptly away and those rifle barrels slowly withdrew. Shanghai settled comfortably in his chair, his face entirely passive as he contemplated the unbroken ash of his cigar. And he was still sitting there when the sun dipped down in the west and was swallowed in the interminable prairie sea.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Grave for a Lawman

A WELCOME coolness touched the air and the light breeze from the south carried the acrid odor of sunburned earth

and the growing greenery of the river bottom. With studied discretion, Shanghai Hickson slid his chair back until the wall was solidly behind him. He spread his longs legs before him and loosened his pistols in their holsters. His eyes ran along the walks, taking stock of the few who remained watchfully in sight. The marshal was not among them, and he was due.

A hush held the town, as if its citizens actually held their collective breaths. Mincing along on tip-toe, the colorless mouse of a man who ran the hotel came to the porch, an iron bar in his hand. After a nervous look at the relaxed Town Tamer, he played a rhythmical tattoo on the swinging triangle, calling the hungry to the evening meal. There was no response as the echoes died and, after a time, the hotel-man again beat out that insistent rhythm. When this too failed to fetch the usual patronage, the little man turned a sickly grin upon Shanghai.

"It's just as well, mebby," he murmured. "First time in my life I ever burned the beans an' let the biscuits fall, waitin' for sunset. I judge there will be no use lighting the porch lamps."

"I judge not," murmured Shanghai, whereupon the little man scampered back to his kitchen.

The silence deepened. On the street there was no sign of the imposter, but before long Cato Champion hurried out of his bar-room, shot a nervous glance across to the hotel, then hot-footed it down the street to the jail. Minutes afterward, he and the man calling himself Shanghai Hickson came to the jailhouse stoop, where they talked earnestly for some time.

From the door of his law office, Mayor Wane Chappell eyed the scene with troubled face. And before every place of business small groups congregated. With twilight and dusk, lights sprang up in the saloons. And then, Cato Champion's boots pounded the walk and the doors of his place swung behind him. It was a signal of trouble to the Town Tamer's keyed senses.

With the echoes of Champion's tramping gone, a faintly audible sound ran from the west end of Frontier Street, died away, then swelled again into the unmistakable roar of galloping ponies. The bridge floor flung back a hollow torrent of sound and Shanghai searched the walks for the town's reactions to the omen. He found it as those groups dissolved and moved to the havens of darkened portals.

Now a score of horsemen swung into the town, ghost-like shadows flashing before the revealing glow of dusty windows. They reined before the Champion Saloon a moment and milled there. The saloon doors squealed open and Cato Champion darted outside to be swallowed in shadow. Jake Dishawn barked a grave and heavy query: "Where is he?"

Shanghai's legs doubled and he came up, tall and deadly. He answered the question by asking another: "Dishawn, why did you come back? I gave you a chance to live and you toss it away."

Those horses reared and scattered and only one horseman remained where he was. He held his ground, sitting the saddle solidly as if to flaunt his defiance of this one called William Marshall.

This man brushed the question aside with a boast: "You eternal damn fool, these are my prairies! I knew your kind at first sight. You're like me—hard and stubborn an' born to rule. My mistake was in leavin' you to cross my trail the second time. We're alike; these plains are too small to hold us both."

"You flatter yourself, Dishawn."

"I aim to find that out in the next minute, Marshall. I'm comin' at you!"

"Ride in!" countered the Town Tamer. "It should be easy—gun-backed the way you are."

A whisper had been running through the ranks of the horsemen. It ceased now. Hoof echoes lifted, and through the shadows, a rough-edged voice struck: "Dishawn, you an' two more who still believe yore lies will take to this gunhawk alone. We're out of it, you double-crossin' dog!" They struck their ponies with the steel and roared back the way they had come.

Surprised at this sudden treachery, Dishawn reined his mount to stare after them. Then he whirled in the saddle, his gun whipping up to stab its crimson flame straight at the Town Tamer. But even that swift movement was too late, for Shanghai Hickson's gun roared in his hand. The renegade clutched at his chest, reared in the stirrups and lunged to the ground, dead before his body clumped into the dust.

"He got Jake!" croaked one of the two remaining horsemen, and they roared straight at the hotel, their pistols hurling slugs into the flimsy front wall. But Shanghai had moved, sliding across the front and stepping into the gloomy aisle between the hotel and its neighboring building.

Shanghai Hickson aimed his piece with deliberation, the strident bark of the weapon blending with the shuddering blasts that seemed to shake the town. He knew he hadn't missed, yet could hardly understand why two riderless ponies sheered past him at full gallop. He cast a fleeting glimpse straight up toward one of the upper story windows, whence it seemed to him a shot had come.

Then his puzzled eyes dropped to descry a darting figure pass before one of the lighted windows across the street. A tall, lithe figure moving swiftly toward him from the direction of the jailhouse—a figure with a wealth of tawny hair framing his leonine head.

SHANGHAI moved three swift strides to place himself outside the walk, then paused. His gun was in his hand and his eyes stabbed the gloom to follow the silent inching of that shadow. Now from his tensed lips rolled an emotionless challenge. Softly he called, "Hickson!"

There was no answer from the imposter, no further movement of that accentuated blob of gloom against the backdrop of night. Seconds ticked away. The black street held a humming tension.

Relaxed, yet dangerous as a coiled snake, the Town Tamer couldn't have told how long he waited. His mind flew back over previous moments of danger that seemed now to be gathering these menacing clock-ticks to themselves in the limitless archives of time. Again he thought of the softer side of life—a gentle woman, a home, and happy children upon his knee—all the things that other men knew and which were denied him. Love and peace and the pleasures alien to violence. Would he ever know those things, or was this the inevitable end for another who had lived by the gun? He spoke again.

"Hickson, you fool. Didn't I tell you plain enough? Why do you choose me?"

"I want to see you die!" rasped the masquerader, and his gun blasted the suspense asunder.

Bullets touched the Town Tamer's coat, where his torso narrowed inward. Shanghai tilted up his gun, hurling his lead to the right and a little above the man's flickering muzzle flames.

Shanghai Hickson felt a burning sear as a bullet ripped along his ribs; he crouched, swaying, his gun bucking in his hand, as from the gloom other gunmen came to back the play started by the masquerading marshal—men who, like the one who called himself Hickson, were hired by Cato Champion.

Men died that night in the shadowy

dust, their life blood making even darker pools in the dry, rutted street. And Shanghai Hickson, his back against the side wall of a building, dared the slugs of those who would have taken away the town of Smoky Hill from honest men.

Now were heard only the echoes of gun-blasts and the rapid running of invisible booted feet, as the renegades ran for their horses. They pounded away.

Shanghai Hickson shook his head, sniffing the low-hanging powdersmoke. He strode forward, his gun hanging loosely in his hand, out to the foremost figure which lay, face up, glazed eyes staring sightlessly upward. The imposter was down, finished. And near him lay the bodies of three others who had sought to bring defeat and death to the king of town tamers.

Then, as if satisfied, he called: "Wane Chappell! Mayor Wane Chappell!"

A sigh rolled through the town. Lanterns flashed and men came on the run.

It was the mayor himself who held a lantern up to view the tall man who stood so formidablly in the street. He recoiled. "By God! he exclaimed. "I thought . . . ."

"He got Hickson!" cried someone who knelt beside that lengthy, silent form. "I never figgered that town tamer would git his, from the front."

"No man born of woman will ever get Shanghai Hickson—from the front!" proclaimed a breezy, confident voice, and all eyes turned to a man who strode from the hotel to join them.

Shanghai said, "Whiplash Nagle! So that was you upstairs!"

"Sure!" smiled the square gambler. "Why should I have ridden out on your horse? I figured you might give me a chance to square the favor. I wasn't wrong." He laid a hand upon the Town Tamer's shoulder, smiled around the gaping ring. "Gents," he drawled, "like other towns on these prairies, you owe this man more than you can ever pay him. He's brought you fear of an uncompromising law. You can turn that to respect by vigilance."

Mayor Chappell spoke bitterly in retort: "I take issue with you, sir. He's destroyed and nullified our first honest effort to establish real law here. He's murdered our marshal . . . ."

"I'm your marshal!" said Shanghai, softly.

The mayor glowered. "I—I don't understand you, sir. We appointed Shanghai Hickson marshal, and you have just . . ."

"I am Shanghai Hickson!" proclaimed the Town Tamer quietly.

"That's right, gents," chuckled Whiplash Nagle. "I can swear to that, because I knew him in Abilene."

"But the hair?" queried the puzzled official. "The mustache. I . . . ."

"The barber yonder took care of that," said Shanghai. "For one silver dollar."

The mayor's eyes went to the dead man in the dust. "This other one?" he asked, studiously. "Who was he?"

"That," said the Town Tamer, with a grim smile, "you will need to find out from Cato Champion, the man who sponsored him."

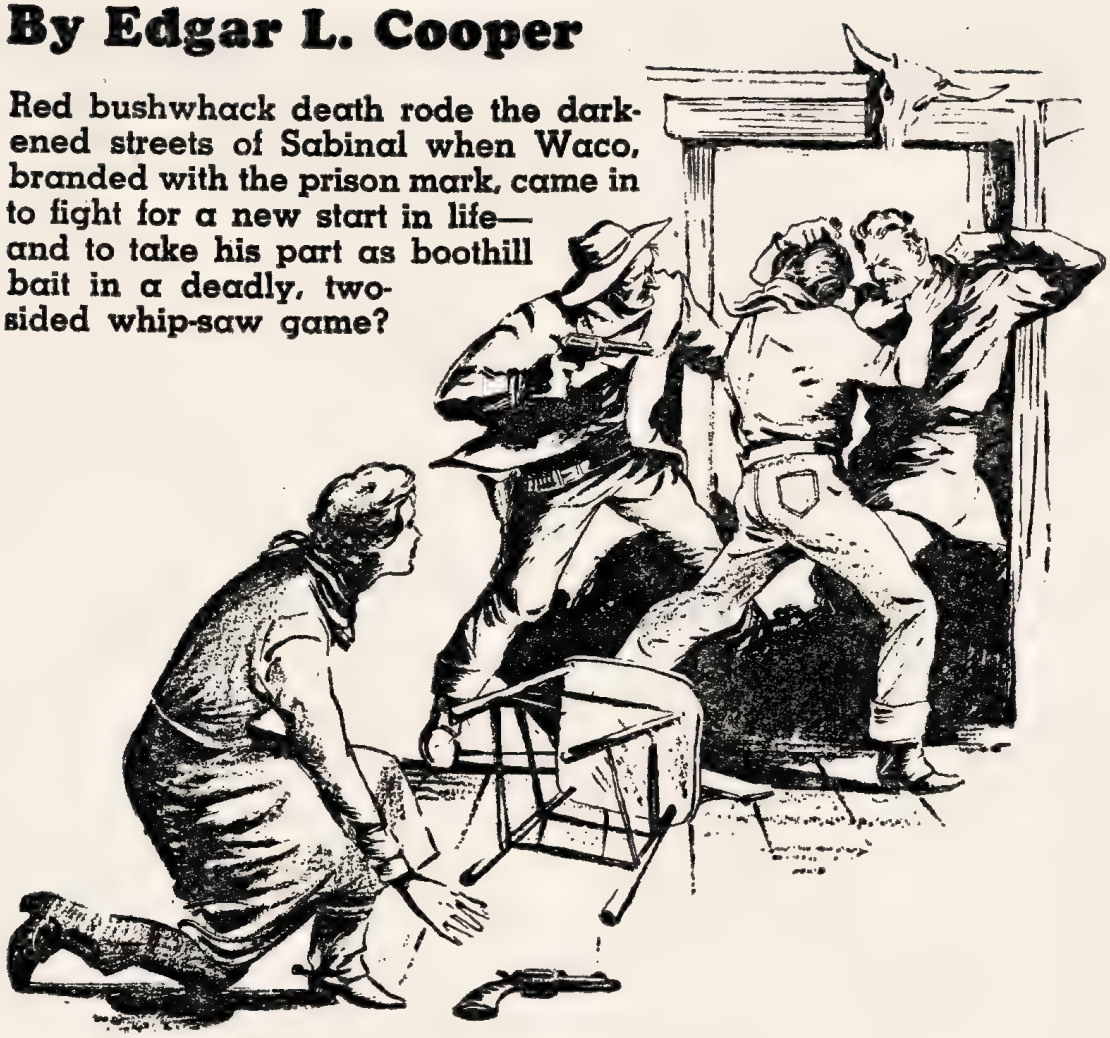
But Cato Champion was gone, nor was he ever heard of again in Smoky Hill. Because he had been the cancer that ate at the vitals of this prairie town, the boss of both the masquerading marshal and Jake Dishawn, there was little further need for Shanghai Hickson's guns.

But the magic of his personality persists after all these years, and should you show an interest when you stop there, they will tell you, with prideful flourish, this story of the Town Tamer's masquerade.

THE END

By Edgar L. Cooper

Red bushwhack death rode the darkened streets of Sabinal when Waco, branded with the prison mark, came in to fight for a new start in life—and to take his part as boothill bait in a deadly, two-sided whip-saw game?



Gunslick's Death Pawn

THE night was overcast, black as hell's own riding boots when the man who called himself Waco left the restaurant-hotel, and started down Sabinal's main drag toward the lights of Grubbs' Roost. A three-day blizzard was dying out, leaving in its wake a still cold that etched like acid through heavy clothing and bit clear to the marrow of one's bones. Weathered fronts were blank faces along the street; here and there a few wan lights splashed yellowly on slippery board walks.

The drag appeared wholly deserted save for the tall figure moving slowly through the deep gloom along the buildings, heading toward the brighter gleam of light from the saloon.

The fact that his senses were alert to any movement along that darkened cowtown street kept him from being caught napping. Ten years in prison had schooled him in distrust. And it was well. For death struck quickly at him from the maw of that ink-black alley . . .

Death—in the shape of a hurled knife, whose faint swish came too late for Waco to do more than halfway throw up his arm, duck. The blade struck, he felt pain burn across his biceps and shoulder like

scalding water. Even as he knew its sear, Waco moved, and moved panther-quick for so tall and rangy a man. A lunge gained the shelter of the building ahead; without stopping he snaked around its next corner and made for the rear, drawing his six-shooter as he ran.

With his other hand he jerked free the knife, still clinging to his heavy coat—

Something told him not to barge into the alley toward that unseen assassin, and that something told him wisely. Hugging the side of the darkened building near its rear, he stopped, listening, eyes trying to probe the obscurity.

Silence hung like a pall back there, black and thick. Somewhere, off to his left, a horse snorted softly. From the Roost came the tinkle of a piano, muffled, tinny. Like a shadow within shadows Waco moved toward the sounds of that restive horse, knowing that something had disturbed it. He knew too, that a corral lay over that way—he'd spotted it the late afternoon when he rode in . . . .

The cloud scud parted a little just then, skinned off a few stars and a wan quarter moon enough to reveal a ghostly moment of half-light. Brief though it lasted, it was enough for Waco's keened eyes to make out the crouched figure at the corral's end, not ten paces distant, which seemed to be half facing him and intently scanning the rear of the nearby buildings.

Each saw the other almost simultaneously. And Waco moved in a blur of action as he leaped forward, an oath rasping from grim lips. His snaking arm hooked out, captured the startled, whirling form in a steel-hard, vicious jerk that almost cut the breath from it, while his drawn six jabbed urgently into the unknown's midriff, hard enough to bring a choked gasp.

Then for the space of five frozen heartbeats Waco stared at his capture. "Gawdamity," he muttered. "A damn woman, by hell!"

Panting, more than a little jarred by the swift ruthlessness of the attack, the captive attempted to tear loose from him, to strike with the light gun she whipped free. But her strength was no match for Waco's, nor did he hesitate to use it roughly. Tall and supple as the girl was, despite the tigerish strength she disclosed, she found herself disarmed and held in a grasp that had no breaking. As if realizing this, she suddenly subsided, going passive in his locking grip, her breast heaving stormily and breath jerky.

"What's the big idea?" asked Waco harshly. "First the knife, then a gun. Wantin' to make sure of yore meat, huh?" He flashed the fiber-handed blade so she could see the ugly stain on its steel.

"Talk!" he jerked at her. "Why did you slit me with that?"

"I didn't!" Her words were unsteady, breathless still, but her eyes glinted like a jaguar's in the dark. She seemed to realize for the first time the sticky dampness of his arm and shoulder, pressing against her wolfskin coat, and wrenched suddenly. "Let me go!"

"Not so fast, lady. I'm a stranger in town, an' I never saw you before." Waco's voice was chill and biting as the night air. "All I want to know is did you make a mistake in this knifin' business—or if yuh didn't, who hired you. An' I ain't lettin' you loose whatever till yuh talk."

For a moment she met the hard force of his gaze with a puzzled something in her golden eyes, one hand unconsciously straying toward a pocket in her coat. "I was asked to come here—"

ABRUPTLY she broke off, and as if angered at answering at all, began to struggle for freedom again. And Waco, holding her with some difficulty, very deftly thrust a hand in the pocket of her

wolfskin coat and drew forth a crinkly and crumpled piece of paper, which he transferred to his own jacket. Panting, she fought like a wildcat—kicking, clawing, writhing; she would have bitten him if he hadn't held her head back.

"Damn you!" she choked. "I'll kill you for that, you—!"

"Such langwidge!' chuckled Waco. "An' from such a pretty gal! Never figgered I'd see one so purty—or as salty!"

That threw the final oil on the blaze of her fury. "If you think you can get away with anything so raw as this!—" her words fairly crackled—"you've got another guess coming, *hairpin!*"

Her right hand, open edgewise, struck hard enough across Waco's face to make him see stars. And before he could prevent she'd raised her voice in a far-reaching appeal for help. Three screams cracked the still night, with about the same effect on Sabinal as a wagonload of glass suddenly splintered into the hardpan of its main street.

"You're a lotta trouble, knife-slinger!" Waco said between his teeth. "Been a lot simpler just to've had to bury yuh, damn it!"

"You *will* be damned, busky!" she panted triumphantly. "Look!"

For Grubbs Roost was spewing out men like an overturned bee-hive, front and rear. With shouts and yells they converged toward the corral, led by a tall figure who ran with awkward high-heeled gait, drawn pistol gripped hiphigh.

"You started this, sister!" Waco's voice was low, deadly even. "Now yuh better finish it—*without lying!*"

And as the crowd came surging up to halt a dozen feet from him and the girl, smearing out in an ominous half circle, baying questions, the rangy rider faced them grimly, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. The girl, leaning against the corral bars, stood a few feet away, eyes glinting, breast heaving.

The man with the drawn six swayed forward, his inky eyes curiously blank and fixed. A swarthy, hawk-faced fellow whose mouth was thin as a knife slash, and whose finger itched on the trigger.

"Don't get spooky, feller!" Waco's words fanged out at the gunnie, staying his pull. Then, to the others, "You all better pin back yore ears an' listen to what the lady here has got to say."

"Lissen, hell!—" The black-browed one's snarled words were cut short by another voice, cold, curt.

"That'll do, Spade. I'll handle this."

And to Waco: "Skin yoreself, stranger! Let that belt drop, pronto."

For a second Waco peered at the speaker, satisfying himself that he was a law of some sort, before unbuckling his gunbelt and letting it thud to the ground. Deputy Pulliam was oldish, grizzled, square-jawed and bowlegged—and also had his .45 out.

"Havin' a leetle trouble with this man, Miss Alief?" he asked the girl meaningly, six-shooter still covering Waco.

"Plenty," the irate girl ripped out angrily. "He sneaked up out of the dark and grabbed me—"

"Whoa-up!" cut in Waco, as the crowd tensed, began to close in with rising mutters. To the girl he harshly said: "Tell 'em the rest of it, lady! How you threw a knife at me from the alley yonder, while I was walkin' down the street toward the saloon. After you or yore friends tolled me there with a—"

"Liar!" she interrupted in turn. "That's so putrid it—"

But she broke off as with a grim smile Waco indicated his blood-stained coat, then with a quick gesture displayed the fiber-hafted blade with its significant smears. The crowd, closing in, halted again, uncertain, peering at the weapon.

"Looks like lyin', huh?" Waco's drawl was a naked sneer. "Looks like I got some *friends* here I don't know nothin' about, yeh! One who signs himself Zev Stapp to a note, an' hangs out in a joint called Grubbs' Roost, an' wants tuh make *habla* with me at nine o'clock—"

"*What!*" The voice rang shrill in the crowd as a warped and waspish oldster thrust forward, grizzled head thrust out at Waco belligerently, jaw flinty as a bronc's hoof. "I'm Zev Stapp, hombre, an' if yuh say I sent you airy note you lie like billy hell!"

Waco, narrowly regarding the dried-up cowman, didn't see Alief Anders' start at the note's mention, or the peculiar gleam that came into her tawny eyes. But one other among the crowd did see, and his lips for a moment compressed, were wet by a swift tongue. . .

"Mebby yuh didn't, old timer," said Waco quietly. "But I've got the billy-doo. Likewise the frawg-sticker—an' the party I found skulkin' back here. Mebbe she made a mistake—mebbe not. I was aimin' to find out when she squawled."

"A lotta bushwą!" burst out the gunnie called Spade. "Likely he wrote the thing hisself—"

But Deputy Sheriff Pulliam silenced Spade with a jerk of his thumb. "We'll adjourn to the Roost, folks," came his grim voice, "an' git to the bottom of this thing."

INSIDE the saloon, with its pot-bellied stove glowing cherry red and giving welcome warmth, Deputy Pulliam wasted no time in taking charge of things. Curtly demanding the note from Waco, he put on his specs and scanned it by the light of the bar-lamp, while the silent townsmen severally appraised the stranger in the light, from the top of his weathered Stetson to the toes of his worn shop boots.

And they discovered his rangy, six-foot frame with its homely face, steeldust eyes and dark hair sprinkled with gray, that of a rangeman born, wearing garb that fitted into Sabinal's cowtown setting as did the sage against the prairie. A man deliberate of gaze and drawly of voice, with muscles like steel rope, and a certain something cold and bitter beyond belief about him.

In turn, while they appraised him, his glance quickly swept the faces in the Roost, halting upon the wolf-coated figure of Alief Anders by the stove. Tall, willowy, supple she was, with her cropped hair glinting like new-cured straw in the lamplight, bared of its fur cap. Her eyes were just as tawny, with green glints in them like a cougar's. And a disposition that matched both, was hers. Hands thrust deep in coat pockets, she surveyed Waco coolly and belligerently beneath level brows, her full red lips a trifle tight.

A short, chunky man with round face and bland blue button eyes, leaning against the bar, grinned at Waco and chuckled throatily,

"Reckon a drink around wouldn't hurt —to sorta thaw out, like. Just what might a fellow call you in polite society, stranger?"

"Waco," replied the lean-faced newcomer shortly, shucking off his heavy brush coat to examine his wound, which proved to be of no great consequence. His brief look at the chunky one told him that the man was a stranger. His cherubic habitually genial countenance didn't disguise a stubborn chin from Waco's acute detection. Nor did his thick-lipped mouth, or bland and limpid gaze.

"Waco, eh?" The rolypoly man chuckled softly. "Sounds like the name of a town, to me."

"Or one he borrered for a number!" added the black-browed Spade meaningly, twiddling fingers on heavy gunbelt. Meeting Waco's slow look, he showed yellow

teeth in a crooked grin, then winked at the Anders girl.

"That drink can wait a minnit," said Deputy Pulliam, moving away from the lamp, the sheet of notepaper in his hand. Old Zev Stapp, jaws working like a chipmunk's on plug cut, tugging at an ear that was a leathery tuft, came limping along with the officer, peering sharply at Waco out of faded eyes almost hidden by brows like whiskbrooms.

"Zev says he never wrote this thing," Pulliam announced grimly. "An' I reckon I believe him. Here it says:"

> Seen you ride in this evening, friend, and recognized you right off. If you'll meet me tonight at nine at Grubbs' Roost, I've got something to tell you which I allow you would crave to know. Reckon maybe you remember—old Zev Stapp.

"Dang hootin' I never writ it!" the oldster emphasized acidly. "Whar'd you get a-holt of that thing, feller?"

"In my room at the hotel," Waco told him. "Found it stuck under the door when I came back from supper. Didn't know any Zev Stapp, or anybody else here, so reckoned I'd sorta investigate what the writer had so damned interestin' I was cravin' to know."

Waco paused a moment, a crooked grin skewing his lips. With a quick move he slammed the knife quivering in the bar top, significantly jerked a thumb first at his blood-sodden shirt, then at the watching girl.

"It *was* interestin', friends—*dam'* interestin'! As yuh see."

Alief Anders' face blazed at the gesture, and those dust-dry words. Three swift steps took her to a halt before her accuser, fists clenched rigid at her side, anger enhancing all the wild, lissome beauty of her. She might have been, at that moment, one of her Viking ancestors ready to strike down a foe, and for a second everyone, Waco included, thought she *was* going to strike him.

But her voice, though throaty and quivering with passion, was under rein when she spoke.

"I believe I've figured what your game is—and I think I know who hired you, Señor *Waco!* But it's going to backfire, sure as hell is hub deep! My advice to you is to cut string out of here—just as soon as these men and God will let you. This neck of Frio isn't healthy for your kind—you'd feel more at home over West Prong way!"

"Or *in* the big ranch at Huntsville!" guffawed Spade Milo, foreman of Broskie Cass' Rolling-8. And everyone present knew that West Prong was *paisano* country, and Hunstville the State Pen . . .

Alief Anders, who had wheeled to storm from the room after her outburst, suddenly stopped in midstride. For a mallet-like fist blotted out Spade Milo's leering visage, driven with every ounce of venom in a big-boned body, almost tearing away the swarthy fellow's jaw. The wallop, sounding like the smack of a cleaver against beef, lifted Spade clear off his feet, crashed him into the bar and dropped him in a limp sprawl, knocked colder than a Frio frog with only the whites of his eyes showing.

"Mebbe that'll hobble yore goddam tongue a spell!" Waco gritted in cold fury, standing over the fallen foreman. In the moment's utter silence which followed came the throaty laugh of the Anders girl, mocking, sardonic—

Waco wheeled toward her like a flash. "If you wasn't wearin' skirts, by hell, you'd come next—"

The hard ram of Deputy Pulliam's six-gun against his ribs buttoned Waco's lips, caused one shoulder to rise, then fall wearily. "One more crack like that, feller, an' I'm cuttin' you loose from yore

crupper," droned the officer bleakly. "An' you, Broskie, can case yore gun!"

Broskie Cass of the Rolling-8, his weapon clear of leather, slowly reholstered, chuckled an apology. But there was no humor in the blue-button eyes that stared fixedly at Waco, unblinking as a toad's.

"Thought maybe our guest was going Bitter Creek for a minute, Pulliam," he said easily. "But reckon you don't need help, after all."

Bending for a second over his fallen segundo, Cass looked up with poker countenance. "Reckon Spade needs that drink pretty bad after all, Pulliam. Looks like his jaw's plumb busted . . ."

Old Zev Stapp, leaning against the bar, wasn't interested in Spade Milo's woes. He stared slack-mouthed and startled-eyed at the rangy hombre in Pulliam's grasp, dawning comprehension in his gaze as it ran along the hard length of the stranger. A stranger who was not a stranger any longer, to him—

"Gawdamity!" he husked, almost swallowing his cud. "Shore as Gawd made green apples it's . . ."

THE deputy, a puzzled frown creasing his weathered face, holstered his cutter, picked up Waco's cartridge belt.

"Dunno but what the calaboose would be the safest corral for yuh tonight, Waco," he began troubledly, when old Stapp interrupted.

"Dadburn it, wait a minnit, John! Ain't you kinda pushin' thing a leetle too fur, now! That gent got a snickersnee throwed at him outa the dark an' thought Alief Anders there done it. Only natchrel he'd do somethin' about it. Ain't no cause fur airy arrest."

Broskie Cass' suave voice followed quick. "Maybe Miss Anders' was the best idea," he pointed out. "Let's have our guest, er—*Waco*—ride on toward the West Fork, or wherever he was headed."

Waco stared the Rolling-8 boss slowly up and down with a gaze like twin steel points. "Listen, feller, he said distinctively. "I've got eyes. Rollin' a gun on me a minute ago was a natural mistake, *mebbe*—but it won't be any damn mistake a next time. Likewise you better be plumb ready to back up any leavin' town wah-wah-yuh make regardin' me!"

"Hold on, hold on, dang it!" soothed old Zev irritably. "Ain't nobody leavin' town—till this mess is cleared up."

He turned to look toward Alief Anders, but she had quietly left a moment before. He spoke to Waco instead.

"You got the Anders gal plumb wrong, son. She didn't throw no knife at yuh." Zev chuckled, spat again, wiped his mouth. "Mebbe she'd shoot a feller, prob'ly would. But she'd git in front of him tuh do it."

Waco eyed the dried-up old longhorn a minute; glanced around the crowd as he built a smoke. "Mebbe I made a mistake, folks," he said evenly. "Somebody else could'a lammed that knife, then ducked back to the street behind me . . ."

His eyes shuttled to the fallen Spade Milo, on to Broskie Cass. "Mebbe somebody *else* made a mistake, too," he suggested silkily.

The pudgy rancher chuckled, shrugged. "I know Spade did," he said. "And guess I made one about as bad, nearly. My error, Waco. No hard feelin's?"

"Nary," replied Waco carelessly.

And Cass said again, "I'll buy the drinks."

After a round or two of drinks, Waco left for the hotel, accompanied by old Stapp, who, apparently prodded by his forty-rod, garrulously kept the talk going all the way en route.

He ran a sizeable bunch of stuff in a wedge lying between the Anders spread on one side, and Rolling-8 range on the other. Nigh seventy he was; sorta stove

up now with rheumatiz, but time was when he rode with the best of 'em. Alief Anders took to Broskie Cass just about like she did to wolf poison, and each had accused the other of rustling.

"The gal's got plenty of her paw's temper," said Stapp. "An ole Waldo Anders had his share, yessir! Married a Swede woman, with the gal inheritin', lotsa traits frum both! Paw's orneryness an' maw's looks. She rods the Curlycue with two, three punchers—makes hit go, too. I'm sellin' out to her soon's she ships enuf stuff to pay my price . . ."

"Which still ain't solvin' who threw that knife at me," Waco reminded. "Got any idea about that, old timer?"

"It's over my head," growled old Zev. "I shore didn't write that note to yuh, no more'n Alief Anders throwed the knife. Mebbe Spade Milo could tell somethin'. He seemed to have his spurs sharpened perticklar fur you. Waco . . ."

"An' got his ears knocked down," Waco replied with short finality.

Half an hour later, in his room, he happened to remember the paper that he'd taken from the Anders girl back there at the corral. Fishing it from his coat pocket, he slowly read:

> Dear Allie:
> If you will meet me at the corral behind Poole's store 'bout nine tonight, I got somethin' plumb important to tell you concernin Broskie Cass. . . .

And it was signed *Zev Stapp*. Waco reread it, built a quirly, sat on the edge of his bed dribbling smoke through his nose. His eyes were very narrow and his face more than grim. He could see himself wrangled into a neat and binding trap.

"So," he opined. "Same writin', same time, nine o'clock. Gal lured there by a note, me likewise. By somebody who holed up in the alley, flung his snicker, then figgered I'd cut loose an' down her as the guilty party.

"Somebody who wants her salted, plenty. An' damn near got his want! Stapp coulda denied writin' both them jobs, plumb easy. Sorta figgered that old coot was actin too innnocent—playin' his greased hand, yeah. Well, the dirt begins to wash out!"

THE sun was out and the sky cloudless next morning, but little warmth lay over the Frio when Waco left the hotel. Early breakfast finished, he went to the livery stable to see about his horse. And what he did see brought him to a very abrupt, intent-eyed stance.

For a long moment he studied the animal, from head to hocks. No doubt about it, the dun had been ridden hard during the night—plain sign showed on flanks and barrel, and the dirt floor at the animal's hoofs. Entering the stall, he gave its left rear shin a gentle kick, and as the horse lifted its leg, Waco caught it; looked.

A strange shoe had replaced the one he'd ridden into town on—a shoe nailed there sometime during the night. Not a new shoe, but a very distinctive one, entirely different in track from the other three. He recognized it immediately, rare as it was—a narrow plate nailed across the heel to keep the shoe from spreading. The dirt stall was full of barred tracks made by this queer shoe.

No use quizzing the stableman or Mex roustabout, Waco decided instantly. If they were in on the thing, they would know nothing; nor could Waco prove anything on them, right then. His horse-face poker blank, he nodded to the hostler, left the stable and walked rapidly back upstreet, keeping his gaze peeled for old Zev.

But a few doors from Grubb's Roost he met Broskie Cass instead. The Rolling-8 owner grinned cheerfully, removed his cigar, spoke a civil greeting. Waco nodded—asked him if he'd seen Stapp. Cass jerked a head in return.

"Yes, just awhile ago. When they were takin' Ben Chambers to the Doc's office. I just come from there. Old Stapp was with the crowd."

Waco ground out his quirly. "Who is Ben Chambers an' what's wrong with him?"

The pudgy rancher squinted upstreet. "He's the Anders *segundo*, an' was found just outside town while ago, plenty banged up. Must've fell off his horse, riding in. Beat over the head and stabbed looks like. Doc says he might come to enough to tell who worked him over. . . ."

Waco nodded briefly. "Too bad. Be seein' yuh again, mebbe."

"More than likely."

Half an hour later Waco rode down the deep cut of the Frio's bank, splashed across a wide, swift shallow where the icy water looked like blue diamonds under the rising sun, went lunging up through another deep cut among the wall of tamarisk and cypress, and so on beyond the Stapp and Anders holdings. Waco rode fast, rarely slowing under a lope.

For he had fifteen miles to travel, and the stableman told him when he saddled that the Anders girl had returned to her ranch the previous night about eleven. Waco cursed savagely at the thought.

Plenty dirt washin' out now. That girl —Stapp—Cass and Spade Milo—with him, Waco, roped hog-tight in the mess. Cinched to the snub-post, a handy stranger as the goat; put on the spot and ticketed for hell the minute he rode into town . . .

His horse gamely tried to keep the pace, but as the miles slid behind, the already tired animal showed, despite the urging tickle of Waco's spur. Yet it was not overlate in the forenoon when the sprawl of buildings that was the Curlycue spread appeared as he topped a rise, and the lank rider made straight for the log ranch house, hitting ground before it at a run.

His worst fears became quickly facts. Hoofprints in the yard were plenty—that barred track on his dun's left hind hoof prominent among them, everywhere. And the front door of the log house swung ominously open . . .

A very dead Mexican woman sprawled in a little room by the kitchen; she was in night clothes and had been shot three times. In the Anders girl's bedroom were signs of a furious combat—bloodstains and broken furniture and bullet holes. And over all hung empty, hollow silence.

The snug bunkhouse at the back gave up two dead punchers, both knifed several times. Evidently the killer had gone there first, used his blade in comparative quiet, then raided the main house. A killer who rode Waco's dun with a trick shoe, and left enough life in the Curlycue foreman to get to town and accuse Waco of the outrage . . .

The crew wiped out, the girl gone . . . With hard, swift strides Waco circled the yard like a coursing hound until he found what he sought—the sign of the departing killer headed west, leading a horse. Forking his weary dun, Waco followed, eyes tracking the sign.

"A hell of a mess," he said aloud between locked teeth. "One broke-necked hell of a mess! And with my backtrail as a recommend I got just about the chanct of a snowball in hell!—"

The spoor led staight to the Frio, where one set of tracks stopped at a steep cut-bank. The other, with the trick shoe, angled away eastward toward Sabinal. Waco swung down, peered a second at the water below. It ran blue and clear, with yellowish-gray bottom that seemed of solid rock. Picking up a stone, Waco dropped it overside, saw it instantly disappear beneath that deceptively firm-looking river bed.

That, and the trampled edge of the cut-bank, showed what had become of the led horse. Of a horse and rider forced to

jump into Frio River quicksand, God only knew how deep—

WACO, his face a frozen mask, nodded shortly, started to turn away from that scene of sickening horror. Alief Anders, maybe bound to the pony, helplessly tumbling into that quagmire and an unthinkable death . . .

"Git 'em up, yuh stinkin' murderer!" came a croaky voice. "Up, by gawd, afore I shoot you to red doll rags!"

And old Zev Stapp, long single-action Colt leveled at Waco, popped like a jack-in-the-box from a shadow coulée.

Waco raised his arms, moved no muscle of body or face as the old man dehorned him deftly, if nervously. "Seen you an' Broskie Cass while ago pow-wowin in town," he ground out chokily. "How much he pay yuh to do this job, *Nate Vickers?*"

"So yuh *did* know me, back in town!" said Waco metallically.

"Yuh dadburned hootin' I knowed yuh! Knowed yuh ten year ago when you was a button uh sixteen over in Medina County, too—an' was sent up for hoss stealin'! Let off with ten year on 'count of yore age, whilst yore paw an' older brother danced under the hang oak."

Fury fairly choked the oldster, but he gulped, went on: "Didn't figger you'd run acrost Spade Milo back thar either, didja, Vickers? Well, he reckernized *you,* feller! An' tole all about it this mawnin'. Purty slick, you'n Broskie Cass, but yuh didn't fool ole Zev Stapp none! I follered yuh when you left town—an'—found *this here!*"

"Yeah, you followed, yuh two-faced, gibberin' badger!" snarled Waco. "After writin' me an that Anders girl notes to be around the Roost about nine o'clock, layin' yore trap for me to kill her after you lammed a knife at me outa that alley. I savvy yore game, plenty. When it backfired on yuh last night, you took my bronc, nailed on a trick shoe and raided the Anders' rancho, makin' off with the gal after killin'—"

"*What?*" Old Stapp's voice cracked with fury. "Write a note to the gal? *Me?* Yuh'r crazier'n a hoot-owl!"

"You wrote a note to the Anders girl," repeated Waco tonelessly. "Feel in my shirt pocket."

"Yeh? Like I writ one to you! Tryin' tuh egg me enuf to grab, air yuh? Yuh damn buzzard, I'm a notion tuh cut you in two right now, an' not wait fer the posse."

"There's somethin' in my pocket with yore name on it," repeated Waco patiently. "Get it, Stapp. Mebbe it'll help clear up this shebang."

The oldster hesitated, stared hard at Waco, then jamming his gun in the prisoner's mid-riff cautiously got the envelope Alief Anders had carried the night before. Stepping back, he read it once, then twice, his face slowly graying . . .

"I talked tuh her, last night," said Stapp dully. "An' she never said nothin' 'bout this—"

"Yuh see?" Waco's voice was silky. "*You* rode out of town just after the girl did, last night, Stapp. The hostler said so. And I took that note away from her, last night. And—*you sent it!*"

"Nope—yuh'r wrong, son." The old rancher shook his head, slowly lowered his gun. Then suddenly he began to curse in a terrible, grinding way, his weathered face working grotesquely. "I begin tuh savvy this, Waco," he said thickly. "Yuh was *s'posed* tuh kill Alief Anders, after Broskie Cass throwed that knife!"

"You think Cass is back of this?" And as Waco grated the question the oldster nodded emphatically.

"I know he's back of it!" Stapp spat out. "He writ both them toll notes. Here, take yore gun. I done seen the light—plenty. But Jim Pulliam's posse will hang yuh so high all hell won't save you when

they git here. This here job is a neck-stretcher—"

"But howcome *Cass* wants the girl killed?" Waco cut in impatiently.

"Plenty reason. He wants her spread, an' he wants mine. After he stole an' whittled an' bedeviled me down to bed-rock, he bought a mortgage of mine from the bank, an' now is ready tuh foreclose cause I can't pay. I aimed to sell to Alief fer its amount, jest to keep Cass from gettin' it. With her out, he'd git my spread, an' then buy in her'n dirt cheap!"

Old Zev sagged, tears coming to his faded eyes, his mouth twitching.

"Looks like he's won, damn him to the Pit! I rode outa town las' night an' talked with Alief whilst she was comin' home—tole her all about you, Vickers. Warned her ag'in yuh, an' Cass, too. Figgered you-all's run-in was staged, by grabs. Now—he's kilt her, the stinkin', land-hawgin', sonuva—"

Waco had been studying the trail of the departing horseman while old Stapp raged. Now, pointing to the tracks, he said suddenly, "Old-timer, that hoss of mine was packin' double when he left. Look."

Zev Stapp did, and elation replaced grief and fury on his seamed visage as he jerked upright. "Yuh mebbe mean Cass druv the bronc off the bank to make it look like the gal was dead, then toted her away some'rs?"

"That's the way it looks," nodded Waco. "I aim to find out damn pronto."

"Then time's a'wastin'!" yelped old Zev, hopping around like a gnarled Apache. "Here, Waco, take my hoss! I'm gittin' too old tuh track 'er shoot proper. I'll fork that woreout brawnk uh yourn an' toll the posse off'n yuh, somehow. They'll foller that bar-track till hell ain't bigger'n a rat-hole."

"An' they'll crack yore neck quicker than that if they catch yuh," pointed out Waco. "You tailed her out of town, remember."

"T'hell with that! Git goin', son—an' wampus huntin'!"

"Wampus huntin', old stager! See yuh some more."

IT WAS midafternoon when Waco came to the end of his trail. A line shack, small, sod-roofed, weather-beaten, stood among a thick stand of jackpines and dwarf cedar which furred the slopes of a deep waterless canyon.

Hiding his mount, Waco approached the place warily, fading through the scrub like a lobo, eyes narrowed, jaws hard-set. Silence, thick enough to cut, hung over the place. Waco's lips were tight against his teeth as he crept along the shack side to the door, found it secured with a brand new padlock.

He wasted no time. Blowing the lock loose with one shot of his pistol, he pushed inside the dim interior. From the look of things it evidently hadn't been in use for a good while.

Above was a tiny attic of poles and rude hewn slabs, with no apparent opening. Mounting a block of wood evidently once used as a seat, Waco smashed against the roost floor and loosed two planks, chinned himself through and climbed up.

A moment later he lowered Alief Anders into the shack. She was bound to a cedar post, the hard-twist rope wound about her body and the post like a mummy's wrappings. She was gagged tightly, and she was also unconscious. An ugly welt, blood-stained, was on the side of her tawny head.

Cursing in a low, savage drone, Waco cut her bindings, began rubbing her arms and wrists, working her legs. He took a half-pint flask one quarter full of whiskey from his jacket, forced some between her teeth. Half frozen she was, with the cruel tightness of those thongs redly visible through the rents in her clothing.

At last she opened her eyes, shuddered quiveringly, closed them tightly again. Waco eased her to a sitting posture.

"You're okay now, Miss Anders," he said gently. "Just take 'er easy a little—an' another swill of this red-eye . . ."

Waco helped her to her feet; she stood teetering a moment, sick with the agony of returning circulation. Waco's back was toward the shack front, the girl half faced it. She swayed unsteadily—Waco used both hands to support her. And quick as a flash she jerked the pistol from his holster, staggered away from him to pull up against the wall.

"You—damned—murderer!" she managed thickly. "I'm killing you!"

Waco never moved. But a skewy, terribly bitter smile edged his lips. "You're makin' a mistake, miss," he said tonelessly. "A bad one."

"You made a worse one last night! Do you think I don't know you because you were masked? While you were brutally killing Jovita!—"

"You figger that was me? Even if I am a jailbird?"

"I *know* it was you!" Alief flung back, trying to press further into the wall, gun held with shaking both hands and pointed at Waco. "You—"

"Well, well, *well!*" came a throaty chuckle behind Waco. "Been sorta expecting you, feller. Welcome to our city!"

And Broskie Cass, stepping sidewise and forward, came through the shack door, pistol in hand. Spade Milo, his swarthy face alive with vengeful gloating, stepped in behind Cass, sidling toward Waco. His jaw was badly swollen—and his jetty eyes pure wolf.

Waco stood motionless. The precious pair had him under the mistletoe. The fact that Broskie Cass had laid his trap at the cabin held unmistakable significance to Waco. Only a madman—or one mighty sure of his ability to get away with the impossible—would dare do what the Running-8 rancher had done here.

"Hook, line and sinker!" Cass was purring. "Spade and I tailed old Stapp this morning, and saw you two pow-wow at the river brink. The quicksand stunt was rather neat, eh, Waco? You saw through that—as well as my note-writing proclivities, I fear. Also, I might add that I didn't try to kill you last night, when I tossed the knife. Intended to only make you mad enough to dispose of the pretty hardhead yonder, who figured on buying out old Stapp and seriously thwarting certain plans of mine—"

Cass chuckled, winked brazenly at Alief Anders. "I fancy the both of you understand, now, that I've dealt the winning hand, and intend to play it. I hold all the trump cards, my friends. So . . ."

IN THE little hush of silence that followed, Broskie Cass shrugged, moved purposefully toward Alief Anders, who stood as if paralyzed against the wall, Waco's six slack in her hand. Though she seemed utterly spent and beaten, there was something about her eyes that Waco couldn't just savvy, as he stood there negligently covered by Spade's six-shooter.

Cass was never destined to fulfill his purpose of disarming the girl, killing Waco, then having his own way with Alief Anders before finishing her off, also. For as he stepped catfooted toward her, a faint yell, high-pitched and yowly, slashed into the silence, close followed by a volley of gunshots.

And, as Broskie Cass jerked to a halt and Spade Milo took a startled step sideways toward the door, Waco flung himself at Spade in a low, headlong dive.

Two gunshots crashed as one in the cabin. Hot flame lanced across Waco's ribs, but he scarcely felt it. He hit Spade like a ton of bricks carrying him under-

neath to the floor, and something cracked as he landed with the full weight of his body on the dark gunnie. The six skittered from Spade's hand: Waco grabbed for it—and missed . . .

Alief Anders fired at Cass the split-second Waco made his desperate play. The bullet struck his swift-flicked gun in a queer manner, for she had shot to kill—struck it and smashed the cylinder just as he pressed trigger, tearing it from his fingers. She, in turn, was on her knees, with a queer nausea dragging her down, her right fore-arm numb.

Desperately, with her left hand she clawed at her dropped weapon, but the chubby Broskie Cass wasn't trying to beat her to it. For Waco had hold of Spade's six with the tips of his fingers, and Cass was away and out the door before Waco could fully grip the gun.

Outside sounded the drum of racing hoofs—a shot and yell, and then another shot. Waco, on his knees, looked from Alief Anders' bullet-gouged arm into her golden eyes, and saw something there that froze him spellbound for the moment.

Waco swore. Swore without regard for the age, condition or sex of his hearer. Alief, smiling gamely but whitely, watching him as he fashioned a rude tourniquet, said: "Do you know, Waco, that's the friendliest thing you ever said to me?"

He raised her to her feet, disregarding the pain across his ribs. Unconsciously, perhaps, she pressed herself against him, leaning hard, her body quivering like a bowstring after the release of an arrow. So they were standing, thus immobile, when the dun hammerhead of Waco's came thudding to a halt, and old Zev Stapp tumbled off and hobbled into the cabin.

"Dang him!" the oldster snarled. "I'm gitten too old tuh shoot, even! The blankety-so-and-such got plumb away!"

He looked down at the dead Spade Milo, his neck broken by the savage fall. "Plenty long overdue in hell, him!" he said.

"I was scouting from a hill watchin' fer Pulliam's posse after I left yuh, Waco, an' seen them two had been *watchin' us,* so I Injuned on 'em down here. I'd uh got here sooner, 'cept—"

The crackle of distant gunshots came from southeast, slapping echoes in the hills like faint thunder. Another volley, then the echoes died to dead silence. As they listened old Zev Stapp licked his lips.

"Like I started to tell yuh," he said innocently. "I'd uh got here sooner—only I stopped a spell out yander tuh nail that trick hoss shoe on Broskie Casses brawnk. Jim Pulliam's boot-hill posse wa'nt fur behint me, reckon . . ."

He glanced slyly at the staring Alief Anders and grim-faced Waco. "Dang my hide, if I don't bet Jim's crowd seen the tracks that bar-shoe was leavin, an' plumb shot hell outa pore Broskie Cass!"

And as old Zev hobbled out, silently chuckling, Alief Anders laughed, suddenly placed her good hand on Waco's shoulder, looking him straight in the eyes. "Where were you headed when you rode into Sabinal yesterday, wampus man?" she asked throatily.

"Nowhere, particular. Just—just ridin' through, I reckon." Waco's face was grim, bitter. "A jailbird huntin' a job."

"Yeah?" Alief's voice was bell clear. "How'd you like to work for a woman?"

"Hell, ma'am—" Waco began, "I—"

"A pretty—and salty woman?" Alief continued. "A gal who spends her nights throwing knives at strange waddies?"

"I—oh, gawdamity! Lady, tell me—wouldn't yuh be scared, havin' me, a convict, hangin' round yore spread?"

"No. Would you, Waco?"

"Hell, yes, ma'am. And I'd plumb like the feelin', believe me!"

THEIR GUARDIAN

By Norbert Davis

A fresh-dug grave, a grief-stricken, kneeling kid, with a hog-leg in his grimy fist, and the tearful, sweet smile of a girl—those things sent Roy Falk, broken, discouraged drifter, into Wolfville—to show a townful of blood-mad killers that no real man is ever licked, this side boothill!

ROY FALK woke up with the ring of a million hammers beating in his brain. The skin on his face felt stiff and hot and dry. His eyes were like red-hot balls of fire. His mouth was bitter with the aftertaste of bad whiskey.

He wasn't surprised. This feeling was nothing new to him. He opened his eyes and stared up at a ceiling that was streaked and smeared.

Slowly he sat up, swung his still-booted feet on to the floor. The movement started the ringing hammers in his brain again, and he held his head in his hands,

FROM HELL

Thrilling novelette of a broken drifter— and his lone-hand fight for manhood

waiting for the ache to subside. When it did, he reached shakily for the cracked crockery pitcher on the stand beside the bed, poured water into a chipped glass. He drank thirstily, poured the glass full, drank again.

Now he felt a little better. He looked around the room. It was small and square. There was a ragged, scuffed carpet on the floor, a couple of rickety chairs, a scarred bureau with a mirror hanging askew over it.

Falk knew that he was in a hotel. He didn't know what hotel, or where it was. He didn't much care. It made no difference. He remembered, vaguely, riding into a town, stopping at the first saloon he saw. After that, things were only a procession of hazily distorted incidents, but he knew from former experiences and from the way he felt now that they must have taken place over quite an extended period.

Yes, he had been drunk for at least a week. But he was dead, cold sober now. It happened that way. He went on and

on, drinking more and more, until finally something snapped under the strain, and he woke up right back where he had started. It was time to move, then. Time to pack up his few possessions, ride on, until he came across a place where he could start it all over again.

He got up and stretched, groaning at the sodden stiffness in his muscles. He walked over to the tilted mirror, examined his own reflection in its wavy surface. He saw a thin, tanned face shaded with black stubble on the cheeks. The eyes were gray and wide set, shot darkly with blood. It was a clean-cut face that should have been strong, determined. But now its outlines were blurred and a little loose. The strength that should have been there was lacking. Falk shrugged at the image, and his thin lips twisted wryly.

He walked over to the window and stared down into a typical cowtown main street. Grayish dust as spread over everything in a soft, thick layer. There was a jaggedly uneven row of false-fronted buildings. A few people moved aimlessly along the street, loafed in the shade of wooden awnings that stretched across board sidewalks. A couple of dusty cow ponies dozed, heads drooping, next to the long hitching rail across the street.

Falk shook his head blankly. As far as he could remember, he had never even seen the place before, although he had seen scores of others that looked just about like it.

There was the *clop-clop* of trotting hoofs in the thick dust, the thin metallic jingle of harness, the rattle of wooden wheels. A rickety buckboard swept down the street into his line of vision, and Falk stared at it curiously.

THE driver was a gauntly tall man with high, stooped shoulders and long bony arms. He wore a rusty black suit, a long black coat, and a high-crowned black hat. Falk tagged him for a pilgrim instantly. There was something about the way he handled the reins, about the way he sat in the seat, as though he were unfamiliar with such things. And there was a gentle, courtly air of dignity about him that was unmistakable even at this distance.

There was another person in the buckboard: a small boy that hunched down close on the seat beside the tall man. He wore a floppy old straw hat, a ragged blue shirt and jeans.

The tall man pulled the buckboard up at the side of the street directly below Falk's window. He handed the reins to the boy, climbed clumsily down from the seat. Straightening his long coat with a little jerk, he started across the street toward a building with a big sign across it that said: General Store, in ragged, rain-streaked letters.

Two men stood talking on the sidewalk in front of the store. One was in the deep shadow of the wooden awning, and Falk could see only the highly polished sheen of his boots. The other man had his back toward the street. He was short and thick-set, with long arms that hung loosely relaxed, fingers almost touching his knees.

The tall man reached the sidewalk, started to step up. In that second, the thick man moved sideways, bumped into him hard with a thrusting shoulder. He turned his head, snarling, and Falk caught a glimpse of his flat, sullenly malignant features. His voice sounded out clearly in the thin, clean air.

"Watch where you're goin', you damned fool!"

The tall man had staggered back two steps under the force of the thrusting shoulder. He bowed a little now, still keeping his air of courtly dignity. Then he started to step up on the board walk again.

The thick man pushed him back with a straight-armed shove. He was crouched

now, blunt head thrust forward. The fingers on his right hand were hooked, not quite touching the black butt of a six-gun tied down low on his right thigh.

"Heard what I said, didn't you, you old fool?"

"I apologized for bumping into you," the tall man said, still courteous. "Now, if you don't mind, I have business in the store behind you."

The thick man laughed in an ugly sneer of sound. "You just think so! This is what I give old buzzards that talk out of turn!" He reached forward and flicked the fingers of his left hand across the tall man's face.

There was an instant's crackling pause when all life and motion in the street seemed to cease. The tall man stiffened his gaunt body in incredulous indignation.

"Dad!" the boy shouted from the buckboard with a tense, thin note of fear in his voice. "Dad!"

"Well?" said the thick man nastily. "Well? What're you gonna do about it, huh?"

"I'm going in that store," the tall man said clearly.

He stepped forward, and the thick man deliberately spat in his face. Automatically, instinctively, the tall man reached into the pocket of his long coat.

"Dad!" the boy screamed frantically from the buckboard.

The thick man drew his gun with a quick, practiced flip of his hairy wrist. He fired with the muzzle almost touching the tall man's chest.

The report was a flat bump of sound that echoed like quick spattering handclaps in the narrow street. Blue powder-smoke drifted in a thin little swirl.

The tall man staggered backwards on legs that wavered loosely under him. He tripped and went down in an awkward sprawl, long arms flung wide. Gray dust rose in a quick puff, and then he was lying stretched out flat in the street. His right hand still clutched the handkerchief he had been reaching for in his coat pocket when he had been shot. He didn't move.

The thick man stepped forward off the sidewalk, touched one thin, outflung arm with a questing boot, then shrugged his widely sloping shoulders casually.

Falk swallowed hard, staring. It had happened so incredibly quick. Right there in the street, in the hot, clear brightness of the sun. That old gunman's trick!

The shining boots under the wooden awning moved a little. They belonged to the man the thick gunman had been talking to just before the shooting.

Falk saw the booted man's right hand slide slyly down his leg. He was holding a six-shooter. As Falk stared, he dropped the gun, caught it cleverly on the toe of his shining boot, and kicked. The gun sailed in a quick-glinting arc, spun in the dust beside the tall man's outflung hand.

PEOPLE came running now, gathering in a tight-packed gesticulating knot in the middle of the street. Falk saw the boy on the buckboard jump down over the wheel, fight his way through to the fallen man.

Falk swore to himself in a tight, thick whisper. He whirled away from the window, jerked open the door of the room. He pounded down a narrow, shadowed hall, down a gloomy flight of stairs. The small, cluttered lobby was deserted, and Falk ran across it, out through the smeared glass door into the street.

There were more people gathered in the dusty street now, yelling questions, milling in excitement. Over the noise, Falk heard the thick man's snarling voice:

"You all seen it—it was self defense! The old fool tried to pull a gun on me! There it is, lyin' right beside him!"

Falk elbowed his way through the ring of people. The boy was kneeling there in

the dust beside the tall man's sprawled body. "He's dead," the boy said. He was a small, hunched figure in the big straw hat, the tattered jeans.

Voices quieted to a thick, uneasy muttering. Feet shifted in the soft dust.

The boy stood up. His face looked white and thin and tense under its tan. He wasn't crying, and his wide blue eyes were glittering, brightly defiant. He pointed his finger squarely at the thick man.

"You murderer!" he said. "You dirty, sneaking murderer!"

The thick man scowled at him. "Shut up, you little rat. He started for his gun first. I had—"

"He didn't have a gun," the boy said. "He never carried a gun. You planted that one." He turned slowly on the crowd. "Everybody here knows you did."

There were angrily sullen mutters.

"The kid's loco."

"He's as big a liar as his old man was."

"Somebody oughta—"

Another man pushed his way through the crowd. He was pudgily fat, with dull, expressionless eyes and a thick, white-lipped mouth that he held a little open in a pouting expression. He wore a brightly nickeled star on the left pocket of his blue shirt.

"Now," he said in an aimlessly, ineffectual way. "Now, now. What's goin' on here, huh? Who got shot?"

"My father did," the boy answered, swallowing with a dry little gulp.

"Huh?" said the fat man. "Oh. Your father, huh? And who're you?"

"You know who I am," the boy snapped. "You all do—you set of dirty, thieving bushwackers. My name is Peter Jacob Jennings. My father's name is—was—Carl Jennings. What are you standing there for? You're the sheriff. Arrest that man. He killed my father."

"Well, now," said the fat man. "How about it, Dan?"

The thick man shrugged in his casual way. "The old fool bumped into me, Sloggins. And then he got mad and started to pull a gun. There wasn't nothing I could do but let him have it. Everybody here'll back me up that she happened that way."

To Falk's incredulous amazement there were concurring mutters from the members of the crowd.

"There you are, sonny," said the fat man, nodding at the boy. "You see how it is. Your old man was just sort of lookin' for trouble, and darned if he didn't get it."

"You fat, greasy slob," said the boy plainly.

The fat man reared back on his heels. "You watch out how you talk, young 'un! I'm an officer of the law—"

"You're a crook," said the boy. "You're a crook like everybody else here. You're all in together. This whole town is just full of crooks. But you wait. You just wait . . . " He stood there for an instant, his small body quivering from the effort of suppressing his rage and sorrow. Slowly he leaned down over his father. He put his hands under the gaunt shoulders, tugged ineffectually at the limp body.

Nobody offered to help him. Not one of the men in the crowd stepped forward.

Falk felt a queer, nightmare sense of horror and loathing. He broke the spell that had held him motionless in amazement, stepped up beside the boy.

"I'll carry him, son," he said gently.

The boy jerked his head around. "You get away! Don't you dare lay your dirty hands—" He stopped short, taking another look at Falk's face. "Thanks, mister," he said then in a low voice. "I'd appreciate it."

The gaunt body of the tall man seemed strangely light and fragile in Falk's arms. Carrying it, he walked slowly across the street toward the rickety buckboard. The

lowering faces of the men in the crowd moved slowly in front of him. The boy followed close behind, carrying his father's dusty black hat.

Falk arranged the body carefully in the back of the buckboard. He stepped back, looking down at the boy.

"If I can help you any more, son. . . ."

The boy shook his head. "No thanks, mister. I'll make it out alone. I'll remember what you did." He climbed up on the seat, picked up the reins. "I'll remember what you did, too, Meter," he said in a low voice, looking straight at the thick man that had shot his father. "I'll remember you—and all the rest of you." He raised the reins, and the buckboard spun down the street in a rising cloud of gray dust.

Falk turned around. The crowd was gathered in small, whispering knots now, and every face was turned in his direction.

"Stayin' long, mister?" a voice asked softly.

Falk looked sideways into the flat, brutal countenance of the thick man the boy had called Meter. "Nope," he said truthfully. "I was figurin' on pullin' out this morning."

Meter nodded his blunt head slowly. "I would if I was you. I'd do that very thing. I'd start haulin' freight right about now."

"I will," Falk said.

"So long," said Meter.

CHAPTER TWO

Boothill for Two

FALK went straight back to his room. He closed the door behind him, leaned against it for a second. Then he straightened up with a jerk, walked over to the chair where his saddle bags were thrown carelessly. He fished around in them, brought out two short-barreled six-shooters. He shifted them thoughtfully from one hand to the other, weighing their cool, balanced deadliness. They were beautiful guns, exactly matched, as alike as two peas.

They looked now as though they had been long neglected. They were thick with a coat of dust and grime, and rust spots dappled the burnished bluing of the cylinders and barrels.

Falk laid them down on the bed, fished in the bags again. He uncovered a rolled up double gun-rig. There were two cartridge belts, two leather holsters, all riveted together to make one piece. The leather of the belts and holsters was elaborately carved—a beautiful job of hand tooling. There were no cartridges in the loops on the belts. Falk remembered vaguely that he had taken them out long ago and thrown them away because they made the rig too bulky and heavy to carry.

Moving slowly and leisurely, he shaved, washed himself up as best he could, put on his spare set of underclothes, shirt, and socks.

"Might as well look as good as possible for my own funeral," he said, examining himself in the mirror. He dusted his battered white sombrero, pulled it down to a jaunty angle over one eye.

He rubbed up and cleaned the two Colts, then put them in their holsters and then went on down to the lobby, carrying the gun rig over his arm. There was no one in sight but an old man with a seamed, leather face standing behind the battered desk beside the doors. He was leaning over the desk, writing with a pen that scratched and sputtered.

"Howdy," Falk said. "You own this joint?"

The man stopped writing and looked up, his face dour and gloomy. He put the frayed end of the pen in his mouth and chewed on it thoughtfully. He had china blue eyes as wide and innocent and expres-

sionless as a child's. He wore a blue and white striped shirt with no collar on it.

The old man nodded once. "Yup," he said at last.

"Give me the bad news, then. How much do I owe you?"

The old man shook his head from side to side. "Nothin'."

Falk grinned in a pleased way. "Well! That's a good thing. I didn't seem to find any money when I was prospectin' around in my pockets this morning."

"You ain't got none," said the old man. "I looked."

"Oh," said Falk. "Well, when did I pay you?"

"This mornin'," said the old man. "This mornin' when you picked up a man off the street. You was probably still drunk and didn't savvy what you was doin', but you did it, anyway. That wiped out anything you ever owed me."

FALK stared at him soberly. "Friend of yours?"

"Nope. Not particular. But he was a good man, son, and they come few and far between in this sizzling corner of hell."

"Yeah," said Falk. "Or anyplace else. It was the button with him that got to me. There's a pretty man-sized kid."

"He is. If you're hungry, son, I'll see what I can pick up."

"Thanks," Falk said gratefully. "What's your handle?"

"Hawkins. Ephriam Hawkins. You been askin' me that regular ever' time you come in for the last six days. Think you'll remember it this time?"

"I think so. Mine's Falk."

"I know. Sit."

Falk sat down in a creaking leather chair. Hawkins came limping around the desk, grunting to himself with every step, and went through a door in the back of the lobby. Falk heard the tinny rattle of pans from that direction, and then the sizzling spatter of bacon and eggs. He took a deep breath and pulled up his wide belt a couple of notches.

Hawkins was back again in a surprisingly short time, carrying a big white platter in one hand, salt and pepper shakers and knife and fork in the other. "You'll have to eat standin' here at the desk," Hawkins said. "Ain't no other place to put the stuff."

"I could eat hangin' from the ceiling!" Falk assured him enthusiastically. He tied into the contents of the platter with a long, gusty sigh of relief.

"Did you know you sold your horse?" Hawkins asked.

Falk swallowed with a gulp. "No. Did I?"

"Yup. The bartender at the Four Aces gave you two quarts of whiskey for him. I think you got the best of the deal, at that."

"He wasn't much of a horse," Falk admitted, "but he had four legs. Well, I won't be needin' him on my next job, anyway."

"Job?" Hawkins repeated. "Doin' what?"

Falk pointed with his fork at the guns lying beside him on the desk. "Skunk huntin'."

Hawkins watched him for quite awhile. "You sobered up mighty quick, son," he observed at last.

Falk nodded. "I do that. I'm not much of a drinkin' man, I guess."

"You sure looked good to me all last week. What was you tryin' to do—raise the price of whiskey?"

"No," said Falk, suddenly bitter. "I just don't like to associate with myself sometimes. That's all."

"Ummm," Hawkins said, not questioning him further.

Falk finished up the last of the platter. He loosened his belt again and breathed

deeply. "Thanks, old timer. You can tell 'em that the condemned man ate a hearty breakfast. So long."

"Wait," Hawkins commanded. "Where you goin'?"

"Why, I was sorta in the mind to look up a hairpin by the name of Meter."

"Uh-huh," Hawkins said. "That's what I figured." He touched Falk's gun rig. "Those .45's? Kinda rusty, ain't they?"

"Yeah."

"Fill up with these." Hawkins placed an unopened box of cartridges on the desk.

Falk looked at him narrowly. "What's the answer?"

HAWKINS moved his shoulders casually. "I'm sort of old for skunk huntin', son. Sort of old and rusty in the hinges. But that don't mean I can't take a peek over somebody else's shoulder. I didn't figure you was much good, son. I figured you was about as useless a specimen as I ever seen come crawlin' through that door. But just since this mornin' I'm beginnin' to sort of like the way you look. You got a lot of guts, aside from all the things you ain't got—includin' brains."

"Thanks," Falk said dryly.

Hawkins nodded at him. "And you ain't got the chance of a celluloid collar on a griddle against Dan Meter. He wasn't hurryin' this mornin' when he downed old Jennings. He knew he didn't have to. He's a lot faster than that when he's pushed."

"So am I," said Falk. "Or anyway, I was once."

He flipped open the loading gate on one of the twin Colts, ejected the corroded cartridges one after the other.

"Two guns," Hawkins observed. "A matched pair, too. Maybe you're a real curly wolf, and I don't know it."

"Nope," Falk said absently. "I'm ambidexterous."

"You're what?" Hawkins asked, puzzled.

"Ambidexterous. It means both right and left handed. See, when I was a little trotter, I was left handed. Nobody paid much mind to it until I went to school. Then my teacher spotted it, and she got my folks on the prod, too. They was bound and determined I was goin' to change to be a right hander like ever'body else. So what happened was that I used my right hand when anybody was watchin' me and my left when they wasn't. Pretty soon it got so it didn't make any difference which I used."

"Ding me," said Hawkins, interested. "You mean you can write with both hands?"

"Sure. Either, or both at once."

"You shoulda been a pen pusher. You could draw double wages. Here I have the devil's own time writin' with one."

Falk finished one gun, loaded it from the box of cartridges, started on the other. While Hawkins watched in silence, he finished with it, loaded it. He put some oil which Hawkins offered him on the holsters and belts, kneaded them with his fingers. The leather soaked up the oil, softened, began to gleam richly.

"Better take the rest of them cartridges," Hawkins said. "I won't be needin' 'em."

"Thanks," Falk said. He slid the blunt yellow cartridges in the loops on the double belts. He adjusted the belts carefully around his waist. He didn't tie the holsters down. They fitted tight, high on his flat hips.

"Just what was you figurin' on doin'?" Hawkins asked.

"Just droppin' around and sayin' hello to this Meter gent wherever I find him."

"And then what?"

"Why, I hadn't gotten past that," said Falk.

Hawkins nodded. "Better start thinkin'

now, then. Listen, son, you ain't got a chance with Meter. And even if you did, you wouldn't last ten minutes after you downed him."

"Why not?" Falk asked. "Is he the head man around here?"

"Nope. But he's Sim Carson's left-hand bower. An' Sim Carson is Dodd's manager."

Falk nodded. "All right. Who's Dodd?"

Hawkins raised his eyebrows. "Don't you know where you are?"

Falk shook his head. "Nope. Where am I?"

"You're in Wolfville, son. It's plumb owned by Dodd. It's in the middle of Dodd Valley. And the Dodd Land and Water Company owns the whole damned shebang from one end to the other. Joseph V. Dodd owns the Dodd Land and Water Company. Yes sir, Joseph V. Dodd, that mangy old packrat, owns everything. Even the land this town sets on."

"The town?" Falk said incredulously. "A man can't own a town!"

"Uh-huh," Hawkins agreed, nodding. "That's just what Carl Jennings said. You saw what happened to him this morning. This here is one town that a man can own—and does. All of it. Even the streets. Everything in Wolfville belongs to Joseph V. Dodd. Jennings sure learned—the tough way."

"How did Jennings cross up with him?" Falk asked.

"He was a pilgrim," Hawkins said slowly. "He couldn't seem to savvy how things was around here. He come from back East somewhere. He was a lawyer. His wife died, and I guess it kinda took all the dander out of him. He come driftin' through with his kid; stayed right here at the hotel. He had a little money and was lookin' for a place to settle. I told him how it was here, just like I was tellin' you. He couldn't believe it. He went down to the courthouse to look up the land records. He found out I was right, but he found somethin' else, too."

"What?"

"He found out there was a gap in a couple of survey lines. Somebody made a mistake. There was a three cornered spot right in the center of the valley that wasn't covered in any of the recorded deeds. Jennings filed on it. I tried to tell him not to, but he wouldn't listen. That's why they killed him. The land he filed on wasn't worth nothin' much. Has a little spring that's never been used. But Joseph V. Dodd don't want nobody in this valley that don't have to bow to him."

"Do you?" Falk queried shrewdly.

HAWKINS' blue eyes gleamed suddenly with little flicking pin-points of light. "Not any! That's what I'm waitin' for, son. Just a chance at that skinflint old hellion. Just one. I'll pay him back for all the misery he's been causin'."

"Doesn't Dodd live here?"

"You can bet he doesn't. He ain't ever been near the place, far as I know. He leaves all his dirty work to Judge Potter and Sim Carson. Judge Potter handles the legal end. Them two are as pretty a pair of crooks as you'd ever want to see workin' in tandem."

"I saw what happened this morning," Falk said slowly. "I saw it all. If I walked away without cuttin' myself in on that deal, I could never forget it if I drank enough whiskey to float a warship." He turned away. "So long."

Hawkins let him get to the door, and then he said softly: "Son."

Falk stopped. "Yeah?"

"You'll find Meter at the Four Aces. That place has a side door in the back, opposite the bar. It lets out on an alley that runs alongside the building. If you make it through, son, head for that door and down the alley. There'll be a horse waitin' right around the corner. Watch

your back, and keep an eye out for Jed Salto."

"Salto?" Falk said questioningly.

"Yeah. He's Sim Carson's right hand man. He's as cold as ice and as slimy as a snake."

"Does he wear shiny boots?"

"Yeah."

"I'll watch," Falk said softly. "Yeah, I'll watch real careful for him." He pushed the glass doors open.

"Son," said Ephriam Hawkins in a thickly strained voice. "Son, good luck to you. If you don't make it, sort of hold a place for me on the other side. I think maybe I'll be joinin' you."

CHAPTER THREE

Friendly Renegade

THE main street angled a little toward the west about half way along its length. The Four Aces was just around the corner on the inside of the angle. There were two flat wooden steps in front of the swinging doors.

Falk stopped with his foot on the first step. He looked all around him carefully, as though he were trying to memorize what he saw. The sun was bright, softly warm on his face, and the sky was a clear pale blue. Falk took one last look at it all, and then he shrugged casually to himself, went up the two steps, pushed the doors open.

It was a low, square room with a beam raftered ceiling. Bright sunlight coming through the narrow windows cut in yellow gold shafts through the dim drift of blue tobacco smoke. A long bar ran along the side of the room at Falk's right.

Falk let the doors flick shut softly behind him and stepped away from them, putting his back against the wall. There were only two men at the bar. One had his back turned, and Falk recognized instantly the long, sloping shoulders, the loosely dangling arms of the man called Dan Meter. He was talking in a low voice to the fat, stupid-looking sheriff, Sloggins.

For a second Falk thought they and the bartender, were the only people in the place. And then he caught a faint sheen of polished leather close to the floor, back in the corner on the far side of the room. The man was sitting in the deep shadow beside a window. He was dressed in black, and Falk could see his face only as a dull, indistinct smear.

Sloggins saw Falk, and his fish mouth opened. Meter turned his head to look over one shoulder.

"Howdy," said Falk pleasantly.

Meter watched him silently for a second, and then slowly turned around. "Thought I heard you say you was pullin' out."

Falk nodded. "You did, and I am."

"Get," said Meter levelly.

SLOGGINS swallowed with a noisy gulp and began to move very slowly and cautiously away from Meter. The bartender slid down behind the bar inch by inch in nervous little jerks. The last jerk took him clear out of sight, and his hands and knees made a hurried scrambling noise on the floor as he crawled for cover.

"Don't hurry me," Falk said calmly. "Don't rush me. I'm a poor lone cowboy from the hills. I gotta take things slow and easy. I'm goin', but I just had to come back and take one more look. It ain't often I get to see a real, first-class yellow-bellied coyote runnin' around and makin' motions like he's a man. I wanta take a good look before I go, so I can tell people all about it."

Meter's wide shoulder stiffened a little, and his snarling mouth jerked at one corner. He didn't make any other move.

"This is it, Meter," Falk said tightly. "You don't have to spit in my face to start it, and when I reach it won't be for a

handkerchief. I'm watchin' your friend back there in the corner just to see if he wants to join us."

The man with the polished boots spoke in a low, soft voice. "I'll sit this one out."

Meter moved in the same instant the other man spoke. His left hand was still resting on the bar, thick fingers wrapped around a full glass of whiskey. With a flip of his wrist, he flung the whiskey, glass and all, straight at Falk's face, and at the same time his right palm made a slapping sound as it hit the butt of his six-shooter. The gun came up and out in a smooth arc.

Falk's shoulders jerked in a quick hitching motion, like a violent shrug. He didn't move his head or try to duck, although the whiskey glass smashed into the wall about six inches from his face.

There was a smashing thunder of sound that seemed to push at the flimsy walls. Meter turned half around, and then tried to turn back. He didn't make it. His knees folded, he fell against the bar, and slid down in a loose, clattering heap. There was a little blue hole squarely between his close-set eyes and another punched in the blue of his shirt with a spreading red stain growing slowly around it.

Falk stood still against the wall, the two guns balanced easily in his hands. "He was just full of tricks, wasn't he?" he asked softly. "He oughta spent less time thinkin' them up and more time learnin' how to shoot." Falk turned his head slowly to look at Sloggins. "Saw it all, didn't you, sheriff? It was self-defense, wasn't it?"

Sloggins moved his head in a nod that was as stiff as that of a mechanical toy. "Yes," he said in a whisper. "It was—self-defense. . . ."

"You, in the corner with the boots," Falk said. "Step out and let's look at you."

THE man with the polished boots got up easily and stepped out into the light. He was tall and thin, very erect. His face was a pale oval, expressionless except for a faintly disdainful twist of his lips. He had a deck of cards in his hands. His eyes were a deeply soft, liquid black.

"Salto?" Falk queried.

The man nodded without speaking.

"You won't need to plant any guns this time," Falk said. "Your pal's got one already, right in his hand. In fact," said Falk, "you wasn't such a big help to him right now, was you?"

"He was draggin' his loop," Salto said in his soft voice. "He was gittin' a little too high and mighty. You just saved me a job."

People were gathering cautiously in the street outside the saloon. Falk could hear the growling mutter of their voices.

"You two just stand steady right here," he said. "I'm leavin' by the back. Don't crowd me. I'm a man that likes lots of room on all sides."

He backed slowly the length of the the room, kicked the side door open behind him with his heel.

"Good-by," said Salto, with a little mocking note in his soft voice.

Falk jumped backwards through the door, spun tightly around. There was a group of staring onlookers gathered at the mouth of the alley. Falk fired twice over their heads, and they scurried right and left like a covey of quail suddenly bursting into startled flight.

Falk ran down the alley the other way. He spun around the corner and stopped short, digging high heels into the dust. The horse was there, waiting close in the shadow under the eaves of a building.

There was a little jerk of motion from around the corner of another building fifty yards away. Falk saw Ephriam Hawkins' seamed, dour face poke into view, suddenly split into a savagely triumphant

grin. Hawkins' hand flipped in a quick motion of farewell, and then he was gone.

Falk swung up into the saddle, heeled the horse around in a tight circle. He was away, down the narrow, crooked side street, in a sudden rattling pound of hoofs. The horse was a high, free-striding roan, and Falk settled himself in the saddle with a little grunt of pleasure.

At the edge of town, where the valley began to dip down in a welter of scrub timber and thickly concealing brush, he pulled up for a second. There was a swelling, sullen mutter from the town behind him, but no signs of any pursuit.

A short rifle hung in the scabbard under Falk's leg, and he pulled it out now and looked at it. It was a .30-40 carbine, a new box magazine model. It had been polished until it gleamed beautifully. Falk noticed a folded slip of paper caught under the hammer. He pulled it out, opened it up. It was a note in crabbed, spidery handwriting.

> The hors is the best one I cud get. The rifel is a .30-40. It shoots dead center at one fifty yards. Under that, hold her low. Ther is cartridges in the saddle bags. The Jennings place is about fore mile due west of town.
>
> Ephriam Hawkins.

Falk chuckled softly. "That old hellion!" he said. He turned the roan, rode into the brush, circling toward the west.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Guardian's Deadline

FALK came cautiously out of the mouth of a draw. The Jennings place was down on the flat below him. It consisted of nothing but a bare board shack, unpainted, brown, and dry looking, an old shed that served as a barn, and a corral. Rusty barb wire was strung around an odd cornered lot on wobbly loose set poles to make a pasture. A little tangle of brightly lush greenery marked the location of the spring to the left of the house.

Falk let the roan pick its way slowly down the slope toward the two figures that were digging slowly and laboriously in the little square of green grass at the side of the house. They stopped and stood up, watching him, when they heard the click of the roan's hoofs.

The small boy—Peter Jacob Jennings, he had called himself—had discarded his floppy straw hat now. His thin, tanned face was streaked with sweat, and his sandy hair rumpled loosely. He looked small and staunchly determined, holding a spade about six sizes too big for him.

"Howdy," Falk said, nodding soberly.

"Hello, mister," the boy said, cautious but not unfriendly.

Falk took off his hat, looking at the boy's companion. "Ma'am," he said politely.

The girl was holding a spade, too. Holding it familiarly, as though she knew what to do with it. She was small and slight; not very much taller than the boy, but her slimly rounded body had erect strength and vigor. Her hair was a smooth, deep black, her eyes wide-set and gray. Her soft lips were drawn into a tight, straight line now.

She stared directly into Falk's face. "Who is this man, Pete?" she asked.

"Oh, he's all right, Miss Linda," the boy said quickly. "He's the one I told you about. The one that helped me with dad, this morning."

Her lips softened a little. "Oh. My name is Linda Travers. I'm Pete's school teacher."

Falk ducked his head. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am. I'm Roy Falk. Will—will you let me help?"

Pete nodded. "Sure, mister. Dad—Dad's in there. . . ." He pointed to the crudely-made pine coffin beside the partially dug grave. "I was wonderin' how

we was gonna—put—put him away. Miss Linda and I couldn't hardly lift. . . ."

Linda Travers turned her head away suddenly, and the muscles in her soft throat tensed as she choked back a sob.

"Sure," Falk said gently. "Sure, son. Just a minute." He swung off the roan, walked it to the corral fence, tied it there. He came back to the grave. "If I could take your spade, miss. . . ."

She handed it to him. For awhile, then, there was no sound but the bite of steel into the hard packed earth, the quiet thump of clods on the growing pile beside the grave.

"That's—deep enough, mister," Pete said, at last.

There was a short length of tie rope under the coffin. Falk held up one side while Linda Travers and the boy managed the other. They lowered the coffin gently into the grave.

Pete stood up straight and looked at the two of them. "Would—would you mind if I sort of stayed here alone just a minute before—we did anything else?"

"Sure not," Falk said softly.

Linda Travers and Falk walked slowly back to the corral. They stopped there and looked back. Pete was kneeling beside the grave—a small, silent figure, all alone.

Linda Travers sobbed suddenly and put both her hands up over her face. "Oh! I can't—bare to think. . . . That child—all alone—with his father murdered. No one offering to help him. It's horrible! It's something no one could think of—"

"I know," Falk said. "I thought the same way when I saw—that this morning."

SHE brought her hands down from her face, clenched them into fists. "This valley! This—this place. . . . It's—sickening to any decent person! That men like Dan Meter, cowardly murderers, can go free and untouched after this—"

Falk was shaking his head slowly. "No more, ma'am. Not Dan Meter, anyway."

She stared at him. "What—"

"He and me had an argument about this matter, ma'am. He's dead."

"You—you killed him?"

"Yes, ma'am. It was all fair and square. He had his chance, but he just couldn't cut it."

"Oh!" She watched him wide eyed for a long second. "Who—are you?"

Falk smiled bitterly. "Just a fool, that's all. You see, I was a real ambitious cuss once—a long time ago. I come across a spot, just about like this one, and I figured what a swell place it would be for a little outfit of my own. For ten years I worked and saved and scrimped. Finally I got enough to cut loose and try her. Every cent I had and all I could borrow went into the place. The first year the black-leg wiped out my cows, the drought got my grass, fire burned out my buildings, and the bank took my land back on the mortgage.

"It got me. I give up. I started driftin'. When I woke up in the hotel in town this mornin' my trail had about petered out in the bush. And then I saw the kid, there. I saw what happened to him. Why, that was ninety times worse than what I took! And did he give up? Did he quit? No, sir! That little kid, he stood right up, and he faced that whole crowd, that whole town. Never a whimper out of him!"

"I know," she said softly.

"I tell you it made me feel like a pretty low sort of skunk. Me runnin' like a rabbit from what happened to me, and that kid takin' what he did and never backin' away an inch. I ain't got much left, but my guns. But I'm throwin' them in with the kid."

She put her hand on his arm. "You've got a lot more than your guns, Roy Falk, to help him with. Yes—a lot more."

Pete stood up beside the grave and

turned toward them. "Miss Linda, would you sort of say a little prayer for dad? I was tryin' my best—but it don't seem like I can find words. . . ."

The three of them stood with bowed heads around the grave, and Linda Travers recited the Lord's Prayer in a choked, low voice. Slowly, then, Falk filled the grave and set in the rough board that would serve as a head-stone.

He had just finished when Pete said tightly: "Somebody comin'!"

There was a trailing cloud of dust on the flat loop of the winding road that meandered crookedly across the valley from the direction of the town.

"It's a buckboard," Falk said, staring at it. He walked across to the roan, pulled the carbine from the saddle scabbard, jacked a cartridge into the barrel.

The rig was closer now. There were two men riding in the front seat.

"Judge Potter and Sim Carson," Linda Travers said.

"Which is which?" Falk asked.

"The tall one is Carson. The fat one is Judge Potter."

The buckboard rattled into the yard, pulled up. The three of them walked slowly toward it.

JUDGE POTTER held the reins in his white pudgy hands. He was a fat, bulgy little man with an enormous paunch. His pink cheeks were round and soft and dimpled. His close-set, blue eyes twinkled merrily, almost hidden in puffy rolls of fat. His wide and cordial smile showed glinting white teeth.

"Ah!" he said in rounded, oratorical tones. "Miss Travers, it is always a pleasure to see you. Master Jennings, as legal representative of the Dodd Land and Water Company, I have come to offer the sympathies of the company and my own deep personal regrets in this moment of terrible bereavement. Believe me, I'm sorry. I speak from the depths of a grieving heart. Carl Jennings followed the same profession that I do, and for that reason—"

"My dad was never a crook, like you!" Pete Jennings said.

Potter shook his head chidingly. "Now, now, my child. Let us not say in haste and sorrow things which we will later—"

Sim Carson made a harshly impatient sound. He was tall, thick, broad-shouldered. His face was like a square block chopped out of granite. His eyes were a light, flinty gray under the black bar of his eyebrows. He had an air of sullen, repressed violence.

"That's the one that downed Meter," he said to Potter, staring at Falk.

Potter raised his eyebrows in simulated horror. "A criminal! A fugitive from justice—here? In this place?"

"Not quite," Falk said evenly. "As I remember, I shot in self-defense. The sheriff saw it and let her ride that way."

"That, sir," said Potter, "was due to Sheriff Sloggins lamentable lack of knowledge of the statutory law in effect in our commonwealth. Subsequently, on consulting me, he learned of his error, and I have since issued a warrant authorizing your arrest. I advise you, for your own safety and best interests, to surrender yourself at once to some duly constituted authority."

"Thanks," Falk said. "I'll think it over."

"And Miss Travers," Potter said, "I would be very interested, as president of the Board of School Trustees, in hearing any explanation you may have to offer of your presence here in such company."

"I'm here," Linda Travers said coldly, "because I haven't lived long enough in this valley to lose all my decency and humanity."

"You leave Linda and the man alone," Pete Jennings said flatly. "They're my friends, and they're here because they're

helpin' me. You got anything else to say?"

"Yeah," said Falk, shifting the rifle in the crook of his arm. "Sorry you have to leave so quick."

"Well," said Potter, all ruffled dignity. "We have—"

"Shut up!" Sim Carson said in his flat, harsh voice. "You use too damned many words. Listen, kid, we come to make you a cash offer for this land. You ain't got no right to be on it, and neither had your old man, but just because of what happened, we'll offer you a thousand dollars for a quit-claim deed."

"No!" said Pete Jennings. "No!"

"Two thousand," Carson said. "It ain't worth that, and if you got any sense, you know it ain't."

"No!" Pete cried emphatically. "No, no! You'll never get it! Never!"

"I warn you," Potter said. "We were just seeking a peaceful settlement of our own rightful claim to the land in a purely charitable spirit. Our only alternative, if you refuse to listen to reason, is to take the proper legal steps to have you ejected."

"Try it," said Pete. "Go ahead. Try it."

"Better not—just now," Falk advised lazily. "In fact, I think you've about talked yourselves out. So long."

Potter jerked the reins. "I warn you, sir, you'll regret this unwarranted interference! And you, Miss Travers, I'm sure you'll deeply regret this association with unlawful and violent elements in our community—"

"Mister," said Falk. "I'm gettin' tired of tellin' you, but I'll give it one more try. Get!"

Potter sputtered wordlessly. He hauled on the reins. The horses spun the buckboard around, and it rattled away in a rising swirl of dust.

"Sorry, ma'am," Falk said, watching it go. "Looks like I got you in wrong."

"Those beasts!" she said in a low, tense voice. "That they come here and—and talk—that way. . . ."

"Snakes," Falk observed, "are just born snakes, and they got to act like snakes until somebody tromps on their head." He paused thoughtfully. "And that ain't altogether impossible, either."

She watched him. "Don't surrender to them! Don't give yourself up! They'd never give you a trial! They'd—they'd kill you!"

"Sure," said Falk gently. "Sure, ma'am. I know. I'll play her out on this side of the fence."

CHAPTER FIVE

Wolfville On the Prod

THE sun was a fuzzy red ball low over the string of saw-tooth mountains that closed in the valley on the west. Falk and Pete were sitting on the battered front stoop of the little shack. Linda Travers had gone back to the place where she roomed in the town.

"Reckon," said Pete slowly, "reckon you'll be leavin' pretty quick now, huh?"

Falk watched him out of the corners of his eyes. "Well now, I dunno. Seems like I'm a mite tired of humpin' and bumpin' up and down and skitterin' here and yonder."

"You—you mean—" Pete said in an incredulous, dazedly happy voice. "You're gonna stay?"

Falk shook his head thoughtfully. "Dunno, now. Seems like I'm pretty bad company for a young 'un like you. Me bein' a criminal and all."

"No! No, no!"

"I dunno," said Falk. "Seems like I might bring you a lot of trouble, what with posses and sheriffs and such after me."

Pete's fists clenched. "Damn 'em! Oh, damn 'em all!" Suddenly he sobbed, a dry, rasping gulp that shook his small body.

"My dad! He's—he's gone! They shot him, and—and he was layin' there in the street . . ." All the sorrow inside him broke loose then, and he cried in stifled broken little gasps.

Falk put his arm around the thin shoulders. "Never mind, son," he whispered. "Just never you mind. We'll fix 'em. You and me."

He held the boy close against him, staring out over the valley. The fading light reflected the bleak, steely color of his eyes.

ROY FALK woke up, without a start, without moving at all. He opened his eyes and looked up at a sky that was a blue-black blanket with little pin pricks in it that were stars. Pete Jennings was a small, blanket-jumbled bundle beside him, breathing slowly and evenly.

They were sleeping out in the open on the little bluff above and directly in back of the ranch shack. Falk wiggled quietly out from under his bedding, reached for the rifle that lay on the ground beside him. He crawled slowly and noiselessly through the brush to the edge of the bluff, looked down on the dark, forlorn huddle of buildings.

For a moment he saw nothing at all, and he thought his senses had tricked him. Then a flitting, bat-like figure sprinted across an open space from one deep shadow to another. Falk caught the faint, dull gleam of a rifle barrel.

Falk crawled back to Pete, touched his shoulder softly. Pete's deep breathing choked off in a startled gurgle. He sat up with a jerk.

"Quiet," Falk whispered. "We got visitors down below."

They crawled slowly back to the edge of the bluff. There were faint, sly stirrings in the darkness now all around the ranch shack. Indistinct forms moved and blended with the darkness. The shack was ringed around with the dark figures, crawling cautiously closer to it.

"A posse!" Falked whispered in Pete's ear. "Lucky we decided not to sleep in the house. They're after me."

"All right!" a voice shouted suddenly from below. "Shoot low, and watch your cross fire!"

A sudden rattle of rifle fire swept away the night's silence. Angling orange streaks shot toward the ranch house. Falk and Pete could hear the snick of bullets boring through the flimsy walls.

Pete drew a deep breath. "They—they never give no warning! They never asked you to give up!"

"No," Falk said tonelessly. "And they didn't give *you* any chance, either. If we was in there, we'd both be punched as full of holes as a sprinkling can by this time. Come on. It's time to move. They'll savvy we ain't in there in a minute and start scoutin' around."

They moved cautiously back across the top of the bluff, down into a deeply shadowed draw. There was a startled snort, and horses loomed up before them, shifting nervously in the brush. There were two of them—Falk's tall roan and one of the bony nags that belonged on the Jennings' place.

Falk and Pete saddled silently. The rattling drum of rifle fire near the ranch shack subsided little by little and finally died out. There was a series of yipping yells, and then the thrusting crash of rifle-butts on wood.

"Breakin' in the house," Falk said tightly, swinging up on the roan. "Come on, son. We're movin' out."

DAWN was breaking in a bursting red glow through the night mist when Falk pulled the roan up on a steep side hill and signaled for Pete to come up beside him.

"See that gap over there in the mountains?" he said, pointing.

"Sure," Pete said blankly.

"If I got my directions right, that's where the B and R comes through."

"You—you mean the railroad?" Pete asked, staring wide-eyed. "You ain't—ain't gonna leave here—are you?"

"Nope," said Falk. "I ain't, but you are. You head straight out for that pass. Haskinville is about ten mile on the other side. Just follow the tracks, and you'll find it."

"But—but I don't wanta—"

"You got to, son," Falk said gravely. "You seen what happened last night. They was after me, and they didn't care who they stomped on in the rush. In fact, I think maybe they was hopin' they'd stomp on you."

"But I don't care! I want to help you! I want—"

"You'll help me more'n any other way by goin'. See, my hide ain't worth much to anybody—includin' me. I can go pokin' around without worryin'. But when you're with me—she's a different proposition."

"I won't bother you! I won't—"

Falk shook his head slowly. "I want you to go, son."

Pete swallowed hard. "All—all right. I will."

Falk fumbled in his pocket, brought out one crumped, dirty bill and handed it to Pete. "Here. It ain't much to go on, but it's all I got. Soon as you get to Haskinville, you use it to send a telegram to Ephriam Hawkins, Wolfville Hotel. He'll see you get taken care of until I get there. Got it straight, now?"

Pete watched him with wide, tragic eyes for a long moment. Then he turned the old nag and angled it slowly down the hillside, a discouraged lonely little figure with shoulders hunched and straw hat flopping a little with each step the horse took.

Falk swallowed hard, watching him. He reined the roan around and rode slowly back up over the hill toward the valley. . . .

Even in the early evening the little alley that ran alongside the Wolfville Hotel was as black as pitch. Falk couldn't see three inches in front of his face. He moved along cautiously, feeling for obstructions with his feet, guiding himself by his right hand held flat against the rough board wall. He was holding one of his twin Colts balanced carefully in his left hand.

A lighted window made a bright, slanting oblong ahead of him. He crouched low, removed his hat. Inch by inch he brought his head up even with the sill. He was looking into the small, cluttered lobby of the hotel.

Old Ephriam Hawkins was sitting in a big leather chair on the other side of the room. He was all alone. There was a shotgun resting beside his chair, and he was slowly and carefully cleaning a rifle.

Falk tapped on the window pane with his fingernail. Hawkins raised his head slowly and looked at him. Falk nodded meaningly. Hawkins glanced cautiously toward the door, then got up, putting the rifle down, and wandered over to the window. He opened it, leaned forward as though he were looking casually outside into the darkness.

"Where the devil you been the last three days?" he whispered tensely.

"Just snoopin' around in the hills," Falk answered in a low voice. "I was figurin' on startin' myself a little trouble, and I wanted to find the best place to let her rip."

"You don't need to look no further. You found it, right here. In fact, you don't need to start nothing. It's all ready started and blazin' like hell."

"What?" Falked asked.

"Linda Travers. They got her in jail."

Falk stiffened in the darkness. "In jail?" he repeated, blankly incredulous. "What for?"

"For harborin' and abettin' a fugitive from justice—you!"

Falk stared at him. "Why—I haven't been near her since that day out at Jennings. I stayed away on purpose. I didn't want to make her trouble."

"You done it, though," Hawkins said. "Plenty. Jail's just the least of it. They don't want to bring her to trial—no more'n they do you. Sim Carson is out gatherin' a crowd now. They're gonna tar and feather her and ride her outa town on a rail."

"Good God!" Falk exclaimed tensely. "They wouldn't! They couldn't do that—"

"They're gonna," said Hawkins, "unless somebody stops 'em. Me, I was figurin' on tossin' up a little opposition myself. They got it all fixed. They're gonna pretend to bust in the jail and get her. Of course, they ain't gonna have to work very hard bustin' in. Sloggins ain't gonna stop 'em, not so's you could notice. But they got to make it look good."

Falk was silent for a long moment, thinking with frantic intensity. "Where's Judge Potter?" he asked suddenly.

Hawkins snorted. "Him! I hope you ain't figurin' he's goin' to help you. He's probably the skunk that figured this out. He'll be settin' at home, nice and peaceful. He's a judge, you savvy, and ain't supposed to be mixin' up in any unlawful doin's. Tomorrow he'll hear what happened and be terrible shocked about it all."

"He'll be shocked before tomorrow," Falk said thinly. "You stay here. I'll be right back."

"Better hurry," Hawkins warned. "You ain't got so long. They're about ready to try that jail."

CHAPTER SIX

Hang-Tree Madness

JUDGE POTTER did nicely for himself. He lived in a big two-story house, gleaming white, set on the top of a knoll overlooking the town and the valley. Water was none too plentiful, but that didn't bother him. He used plenty to make a wide green sweep of lawn, to coax ornamental shrubs to grow thick and cool close to the house.

He was sitting now under the soft greenish glow of a reading lamp in his study. A thick law book rested on his fat knees, and he was leafing idly through it, pudgy fingers fluttering the pages. A crystal decanter of brandy sat on the little stand beside his chair. He felt warm and pleasant and comfortable, and a self-satisfied little smirk twisted his lips.

There was a sudden tinkling smash.

Potter jerked his bald head up, startled, staring at the window across the room. One of the small diamond-shaped panes had been knocked out, and the gleaming muzzle of a .45 revolver peered through it at him like a round, blank eye.

"Come here," Falk's voice said coldly.

Potter jerked his big body out of the chair. His knees were like rubber under him, and he staggered weakly, quaking all over, as he walked toward the window.

"Unlock it and step outside," Falk ordered.

Potter fumbled numbly with the catch, pulled the hinged sash back, squeezed his bulk through into the darkness. The hard muzzle of the .45 dug into his paunch.

"Turn around and march."

Potter flopped his hands, suddenly regained the use of his voice. "What—You can't do—I warn you—"

Falk raised the big revolver until it was on the level with Potter's bulging eyes. Potter could see Falk's thumb holding the hammer back at full cock.

"Git," said Falk.

Potter swallowed with a noisy gulp. He turned around and blundered down the slope, crashing heedlessly through his prized, expensive shrubs. The gun muzzle

herded him along from behind, punching him at every step.

As they came closer to the center of the town they could hear a low, rolling mutter of sound. One sullenly angry voice made up of scores of voices—the inhuman, unfeeling voice of the mob. It was repressed now, sullen and waiting, but ready to flare into screeching insane fury at the slightest touch.

It grew louder, angrier, more threatening, as Falk herded Potter down the little black passageway into the side door of the hotel.

"Stop," Falk said. He leaned forward and rapped on the door with the butt of his gun.

It opened instantly, and Ephriam Hawkins loomed up in the doorway, his shotgun held ready across his arm.

"Ah!" he said. "Why, it's Judge Potter! What a pleasure it is to see you this evening, Judge!"

"Inside," Falk ordered.

Potter slid inside the room and stood there, crowded close against the wall, staring fearfully from one to the other.

"What—what's the meaning—this outrage? I warn you—kidnapping is a serious offence. You—you—"

"Listen," Falk said tightly. "Do you hear them outside? Do you? Do you know what that means?"

Potter stuttered in white lipped terror. "I—I— No! No, I don't! Unlawful assembly! I don't know—"

"They're going to break in the jail," Falk said. "They're going to take Linda Travers out and—and tar and feather her. They're going to do that—if you don't stop them!"

Potter flopped his arms. "I—I can't— No control over—"

"You will," said Falk. "Hawkins here, is going to take you up on the roof of this hotel. It ain't very high, but it's high enough. He's going to tie a rope around your neck and tie the other end of it to something real solid. He's going to walk you to the edge of the roof. You can see it all from there. And when the jail door goes down, that's the last you'll see, because when it does, Hawkins is going to push you off the edge."

"No!" Potter shrieked in horror. "No! You can't—"

"Haw!" said Hawkins, savagely triumphant. "Can't I, though!"

"You'll have your chance to talk to that mob," Falk said coldly. "And you better talk fast. If they so much as touch that girl —you won't be here to see it."

"You don't dare!" Potter wailed. "You can't—"

Hawkins punched him with the shotgun. "Up them stairs, you fat wind-bag!"

"Give me five minutes before you start him off," Falk said tensely.

FALK crept around from the back of the jail, deep in the shadow. It was a square, one-storied building built of thick, rough timber, facing the head of the main street at a slight angle. From the corner Falk could look straight down toward the Four Aces at the turn in the street.

The mob was gathering there—a loose, shadowy group of figures that churned and yelled with a sort of maniac, senseless fury. A sea of white, tense faces and uplifted jerking arms. Someone had started a rough bonfire in the square in the center of the street intersection. It crackled in bright, hungry little fingers, growing slowly. There was the faint rip and crash of wood as members of the mob hunted for more fuel for it.

Sim Carson's tall, square figure was faintly discernible in the center of the milling group. Falk could hear the harsh, wordless bellow of his voice.

There was more wood piled on the bonfire, and the flames reached eagerly toward the dark sky like great red-dripping hands.

Falk stared hard in its eery light at the roof of the hotel.

He could see faint, shadowy movement there. Then the flames of the bonfire shot suddenly higher, revealing the whole building plainly. Ephriam Hawkins and Judge Potter were standing side-by-side on the very edge of the roof. As Falk watched, Hawkins ducked back out of sight behind the parapet, and Potter shouted at the men below him—a wailing unearthly screech with the terror of a damned soul bubbling up through it.

Every man in the street turned and looked up at him.

"Men!" Potter shrieked at them. "You can't do this awful thing! You can't thrust aside the forces of law and order in this violent manner! You can't—"

His voice raved on at them, cracked and incoherent with fear, but Falk didn't wait to hear more. He slid around to the front of the jail, full in the light of the bonfire, rapped loudly on the iron-studded panels of the door with the barrel of his six-gun.

"Sloggins!" he said hoarsely. "Quick! Open up!"

There was a clank of heavy bolts. The door inched back cautiously, and Sloggins' white, blank face peered through the opening.

"What—"

Falk snapped the sixgun forward in a short, vicious arc. The barrel cut into Sloggins' soft face with a soggy thud. He gave one scream of pain and crashed backwards. Falk pushed through the door, slammed it shut behind him.

Falk leaned over him, jerked a big ring of keys from a snap catch on his belt, slid cautiously and quietly through the door at the back of the office that led to the cell corridor.

It was dark in here, close, thick with the heavily penetrating sour odor of disinfectant. The flames outside reflected in ruddy little gleams from the polished steel of thick bars. Faintly Falk could hear Potter's voice howling at the mob.

"Linda," he whispered softly. "Linda Travers."

There was a slight movement, a stir in the deep shadow of one of the cells, and then he could see that pale oval of her face peering through the bars at him.

"Roy Falk," she said in a soft, unbelieving whisper. "You—came for me. . . ?"

Falk fumbled with Sloggins' keys, jerked the heavily barred door open. He caught the faint, fresh odor of her hair, and then she was close to him, clinging tightly.

"They—they were going to—to. . . . Sloggins told me. He was laughing. That mob out there—"

"I know," Falk said tensely. "Come on. We've got to get out of here. Potter can't hold them much longer. Hurry."

THEY ran blindly down the dim corridor, out into the dusty little office. Sloggins still lay limply quiet on the floor. Falk jerked the big door open, looked out. In that second, Judge Potter's voice rose to a crescendo of screaming terror.

"Sim! No! Don't— You—"

Falk saw Sim Carson in the street directly in front of the hotel. His arm, raised upward, made a straight bar in the flickering light of the bonfire, ending in the glitter of a gun barrel. The revolver jerked a little in his hand. Its report was a flat pop.

Potter screamed again, horribly, and fell forward off the roof. He fell only about ten feet, and then the invisible rope around his neck jerked him up short. His bulky body bumped and spun and twisted against the building.

"The jail!" Carson yelled. "Come on! Get her!"

The mob had its foretaste of blood now, and its members swept down the street

toward the jail in a hooting, howling maelstorm. Falk jumped backwards into the jail office and slammed the door, shooting the big bolts to hold it firm.

"Too late," he said to Linda Travers. "They'd catch us if we tried to run for it. There's no back door to this place. We'll have to fight it out from here."

He seized a carbine from the rack against the wall, poked the stubby barrel through the window. He fired as fast as he could work the lever. He saw one dim figure flop down, squirming in the dust, saw another twirl in a crazy dance, stagger into the cover of the shadows. The mob split right and left, rolling back on itself, fighting to find cover.

"Sloggins!" Carson's harsh voice bellowed from the darkness. "You lunk-headed fool! Are you crazy?"

"I warn you!" Falk shouted through the window. "Stay back! All of you!"

There was an instant's dead pause while the street seemed to writhe and move with shadows that were alive.

"It's Falk!" Carson yelled. "That murdering killer! He's done for Sloggins! Roust him out, men!"

There was an incoherent, mingled yell of fury, and then gunfire crashed in a rolling wave of sound. Falk seized Linda Travers, forced her down close to the floor against one wall. Bullets snapped and thudded against the thick walls, careened off steel bars with ugly little screams. Falk knelt at the corner of a window, firing back blindly at the streaks of flame that bit out of every shadow.

Falk emptied the carbine, reached for another. Linda Travers pushed it into his hand. She was crouched close to him beside the window. Her eyes were like wide, shining dark pools. Her lips moved soundlessly in the uproar.

Carson's voice began to bellow from a new direction in the darkness. It beat down the sound of the gunfire, sounded out clearly.

"Wait, men! Wait! I've got the medicine that'll fix him!"

Falk had no warning of what it was until he saw a fizzing twirling streak shoot out of the darkness, curve toward the jail in a long arc. There was a blasting concussion that knocked him reeling backwards, started a furious, numb ringing in his ears. His eyes were blinded with the great purplish glare of the explosion. The jail seemed to rock and heave on its foundations.

"Linda!" Falk said. He could feel his lips move, but he couldn't hear his own voice. "Linda!"

She touched his arm reassuringly. Falk staggered blindly to the window, and emptied both sixguns into the night. The sound of their heavy reports was like a far away ticking in his ears. The ability to hear came back a little, and he could distinguish Carson's commanding voice, faint, thin and distant.

"Wait! Wait! We'll give him some more!"

Falk sank down on his knees beside Linda Travers. "Dynamite," he said breathlessly. "That one—didn't quite hit building. Next one—will."

She smiled at him gently, unafraid. "I know. It—it's all right now—with you here. . . ." Then, very softly, she said: "I love you."

Falk tried to get to his feet. "If they'd only wait! If I could get you out—"

She held him back. "No. I'd rather stay—with you."

A new voice yelled from the darkness outside: "Men! Men! Damn you—you pack of murdering idiots! What're you doing?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Boss of Wolfville

FALK rose to his feet with Linda Travers held close against him, peered through the window. Unnoticed in the noise, a light open bodied wagon had come into the main street, pulled up beside the still roaring bonfire. A man was standing up on the seat. He was gauntly thin, tall. He wore no hat, and his gray hair tumbled down over his forehead like that angrily rumpled mane of a lion.

"Carson!" he shouted. "Where are you, damn you! Answer me! I know you're here! I heard you!"

Carson's voice came from the darkness. "Yeah. I'm here. What do you want, Dodd?"

"Dodd!" Falk whispered to Linda Travers. "It's Joseph V. Dodd! And look beside him! It's Pete!"

There was a hunched little figure in a straw hat sitting on the seat of the wagon, holding the reins of the horses. It was Pete Jennings.

"Carson!" Dodd yelled. "You insane fool! Stop this madness at once! You're through, you hear? You're done with! You're fired!"

Carson laughed sneeringly. "Thanks. You saved me the trouble of quittin'. And now since we're breakin' off relations—get off my property. You're trespassin'!"

"Trespassing!" Dodd repeated incredulously. "Why, you idiot, I own every foot of this valley!"

"Hah!" Carson answered. "Do you, now? That's where you're mistaken! You stayed away a little too long, Dodd. Every deed to every piece of property in this valley is registered in the name of the Todd Land and Water Company. Get it? Not Dodd, but Todd! Judge Potter arranged it all. Yeah, he fixed it, and I just fixed him! Now I'm the sole owner of the Todd Land and Water Company! You're out!"

"You crook!" Dodd shouted. "You can't get away with a steal like that! I'll show—"

There was a little spit of flame from the darkened corner of a building in the direction from which Carson's voice had come. Dodd's roaring voice choked off in midsentence, and his gaunt body tumbled stiffly backwards. In falling, he struck against Pete Jennings, and they both rolled headlong into the street.

"That fixed him!" Carson yelled. "Come on, now! We'll wipe out the whole bunch! We'll see who runs this valley!"

Falk called out the window. "Carson! Listen to me! Let's settle this thing now! Just between the two of us! I'll step out of here and meet you face to face!"

Carson's voice roared with mocking laughter. "Listen to him squeal! He didn't like the medicine I fixed for him! But you're gonna get some more of it, murderer! You and that nosey schoolma'am! I'll show—"

There was a screeching wail, as weirdly penetrating as the howl of a lobo wolf. It was Ephriam Hawkins. He was sitting on the roof of his hotel, plainly in sight of the light of the bonfire below him, with his legs dangling over the edge. He was smoking a big cigar, and in his lap he held a bundle of yellow sticks as big around as a man could reach with one arm.

"Carson!" he hooted, leaning over to look down into the street. "You give me an idea with your fireworks! Now take a look at this! I collected every stick of dynamite I could find in town! She's all here—capped and ready to go!"

THERE was not a sound, not a murmur, from the men hidden in the darkness all around him in the street below.

Hawkins chuckled gleefully. "Well? Here I am! As pretty a target as you'd care to see. Why don't you shoot? You'll sure know it quick if you hit me!"

There was a low, tense mutter from the hidden men.

Hawkins raised the length of fuse that was fastened to the yellow sticks and held it a half inch from the glowing end of his cigar. "Listen to me, all of you. There are a bunch of honest men mixed up among you. Those who are honest had better get out. But the others will do just what I say, or I'll light this fuse and hop off the roof. There won't be enough left of this town to make a good sized toothpick, and nobody left here to pick their teeth with it. There's enough dynamite here to blow this whole town clean out of the valley!"

Carson's voice sounded thickly tense: "What do you want, you crazy fool?"

"You heard Falk," Hawkins answered. "He made you an offer, and you're gonna take him up. Just step out into the middle of the street and meet him. I'll be the referee. And there better not be any spectators takin' a hand, either, or we all blow up together!"

Falk frantically clicked fresh cartridges into his sixguns. He jerked open the big door, and then Linda Travers caught him by the arm.

"No! You can't—"

"I've got to!" Falk said tightly. "It's our only chance!"

He thrust her back into the office, slammed the door.

The bonfire was dying down now, and its failing flames threw snaky black shadows that danced and twisted weirdly. Falk walked slowly down the steps, into the soft dust of the street.

"There he is!" Hawkins shouted. "Come on out of cover, Carson, you sneaking sidewinder, or we'll all go up in smoke!"

Falk was walking steadily down the street. The shadows boiled and squirmed with motion around him. His head still rang numbly from the effects of the first explosion of dynamite. His body felt stiff and clumsy, and his legs were like sticks under him. Each step seemed to jar the base of his brain.

Carson suddenly stepped out of the shadows ahead of him. His big, blocky body was crouched a little, and even as he came into sight, his right arm swept up and leveled. Flame spat at Falk.

Falk felt his own palms slap the butts of his holstered guns, slide them up in a quick, hitching jerk. The guns jumped and roared in his hands. Something smashed into his side with a breath-taking jar, and he felt himself spinning helplessly, falling. He steadied himself with a tremendous effort, then slid down weakly on one knee.

Carson was falling stiffly sideways, both hands held up empty, clawing at the air. But there was another flat report, and Falk felt the breath of the bullet fresh in his face. He half turned, sagging as the pain bit into his side.

There in a darkened doorway, the flames jumped momentarily from the remnants of the bonfire, gleamed on the polished smoothness of leather. Falk's guns swept around, seemed to fire of their own accord. Jed Salto staggered forward into sight, sprawled loosely, rolling in the dust.

Falk tried to stand up, and the pain rolled over his eyes in a black, dense curtain. He fell forward. The jar seemed to clear away the darkness a little, and he knew Linda Travers was kneeling beside him, cradling his head in her arms, crying in soft, breathless sobs.

Pete Jennings' voice sounded shrilly: "Miss Linda! Miss Linda! Is—is he . . ?"

"No," she said. "No, thank God! Oh, thank God!"

And then, strangely enough, Falk heard the roaring voice of Joseph V. Dodd. He fought to open his burning eyes a little. Dodd was standing on the wagon box again, a gauntly terrible dust-streaked figure with blood in a bright smear on his cheek.

"You Carson men!" he yelled hoarsely. "You set of sneaking, murdering thieves! Don't let the sun rise on you in this valley! I'll hound every one of you with every dollar and man I've got, and there are plenty of good citizens right here who'll join me."

"Pete," Falk said in a weak, whispering voice. "Dodd, how did you—"

Pete swallowed, shame-faced. "Well—I went and looked him up. I was gonna—gonna shoot him. Only I talked to him first, kinda. And—and he didn't know no more about what Potter and Carson was doin' than anybody. Boy, was he mad when I told him! We come r'arin' right down here as fast as we could."

Ephriam Hawkins came wandering out of the hotel. He had the bundle of yellow sticks tucked carelessly under one arm. He glowered sourly at Joseph V. Dodd.

"So you're the old hellion I spent all my spare time cussin'. Well, you look kinda human after all. I suspected you'd have a couple horns and a ting-tang tail."

"Put that dynamite down, you fool!" Dodd yelled at him. "Do you want to blow us all up?"

"Don't get all heckled up," Hawkins advised calmly. "This ain't dynamite. I couldn't find none. This is just a bunch of old wax candles I had in the hotel. I'd sure looked funny tryin' to blow up anything with 'em." He stared anxiously down at Falk. "You all right, son?"

Falk nodded.

"Why, sure he is!" Joseph V. Dodd shouted violently. "He has to be! He's the new boss of Dodd Valley! Steal my valley with their phony deeds, will they? Huh! A fat chance!"

"Looks to me," said Hawkins, staring down at Linda Travers and Falk, "looks to me, just off hand, like that new boss of Dodd Valley has gone and got himself a private boss all of his own. Ma'am, if you could sort of persuade yourself to let loose of him for a minute, we'll take him inside and patch him together."

THE END

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Sheepers Savvy Gun-Talk

Bart Howell, two-fisted, fighting cowman, didn't so much mind the bullet which that sheep-running, red-headed girl slapped into his shoulder as he hated waking up with his head in her lap! But girl or not, all sheepers are poison to a cowman, and must get out—or take their medicine in cattlemen's hot lead!

BART HOWELL, owner of the Double Circle ranch, four thousand acres of mountain and valley, was in the rigging shed working oil into the skirt of a saddle that had gone stiff from too much weather when Andy Tibbets, his foreman, brought the news.

"Hey, Bart," shouted the bandy-legged

Vigorous Pioneer Novelette—of a cowman who had the courage to turn traitor!

By John A. Saxon

(Author of "Return of the Gun Prodigal," etc.)

ramrod of the outfit, as he flung himself from a horse that showed sign of hard riding, "they've sold the Lazy K. I heard about it in town this afternoon. Some out uh the state bunch took it in at a tax sale."

Bart Howell straightened to his full, lanky height, raised a hand dripping with harness oil, and shoved his battered old Stetson off his forehead with the back of his wrist. His blue eyes, clouded with surprise, stabbed at the foreman.

"Well, I'll be dog-goned," he said, finally. "Yuh mean to tell me that some crazy bunch of galoots are goin' tuh try tuh do somethin' with that place that's been ruined by no water and too much rock for ten years? Hell, if it was any good, I would have bought it myself. Any

half respectin' steer would starve tuh death on that spread."

Something in the expression of the foreman's face caused Bart Howell's brows to straight-line. Andy was trying to tell him something else.

"That ain't what sent me foggin' out here, Bart," the foreman went on, his face indicating that he was the bearer of bad news. "I know as well as you do, that that passel uh rock ain't worth anything. Yore dad didn't even claim it when he laid out the Double Circle, but—Bart, *they're bringin' in sheep!*"

If the foreman had exploded a stick of dynamite under the feet of the owner of the Double Circle, he could have created no greater shock. Bart Howell stood with his hands hanging, the saddle oil dripping into tiny craters in the dust at his feet.

"Woolies? In the *Aquilas?* This ain't sheep country. It never has been, an' never will be."

"We'll have tuh run 'em off boss," said the foreman. "They're bringin' in two thousand head over Wolf Creek Pass today. There's more comin'. Whatever's done about it will have to be done from this side—by us. I talked to Pendergast of the Diamond Dot outfit, an' he says it's up to you, 'cause the Lazy K's really uh part uh the Double Circle. He said yuh should uh bought it in, years ago."

Bart scowled. "Oh, he did, did he? Well, I didn't buy it in, but nobody's goin' tuh run sheep under my nose. We'll stop 'em right now. Come on, Andy."

He wiped his hands on an old rag, slapped a kak on his horse, yanked the latigos down with a vicious jerk, and swung aboard.

"Wait uh minute, Bart," yelled the foreman, "I got tuh get my guns out uh my war-bag at the bunkhouse."

"Never mind yore guns," said the boss of the Double Circle. "We don't need no guns tuh deal with a sheep outfit. Come on."

AS THEY galloped toward the Lazy K, an abandoned spread which bordered the Howell ranch five miles up the canyon, Bart questioned his foreman in detail.

"How'd they get across the high desert with uh bunch of sheep an' not get spotted, anyhow?" he asked through set teeth.

"Smart work, Bart," replied the foreman. "They knew they couldn't get in on this side uh the mountains so they brung 'em over the line sixty miles north, sayin' they was Oregon stuff goin' tuh the shippin' pen at Macy. Instead uh that they cut off near Eagle Mesa an' came down the other side."

"How many of 'em?" queried Bart.

"Pendergast figgered there was about six thousand, but—"

"Well, why in hell didn't the Slash E outfit stop 'em then?" cut in the owner of the Double Circle angrily.

Andy shrugged his shoulders. "Yuh wouldn't let me tell yuh, Bart," he complained. "Hank did. But she lined a Winchester on him an' told him they was on public range an' fer him tuh mind his own business, and then she—"

"She?" demanded Bart Howell, looking curiously at his foreman. "Yuh mean tuh tell me—"

Andy nodded. "It's uh gal," he said, swallowing hard. "Uh red headed gal. An' Hank says she's got the hardest eye he ever looked at."

Bart laughed. " So Hank let a gal with a long gun back him down—a sheep gal at that," he grunted.

"But she's got some tough *hombres* backin' her play, Bart," added the foreman. "They took Hank's guns away from him an' sent him back to the spread with his hands tied behind his back, and' his feet fastened under thuh belly uh his

hoss. An' then you tell me we won't need guns tuh handle that outfit!"

The smile left Bart Howell's face, and his jaw set. "Tough bunch or no," he replied, "they're going tuh be stopped before they get through the pass. If they once get over the mountains it won't be so easy. That red haired gal may have bought and paid for the Lazy K, but she ain't goin' tuh raise sheep there. Go back to the ranch, Andy. Get yore guns an' mine, and some of the boys. If any damn sheep outfit wants fight, they'll get it—whether they're rodded by uh red headed gal or uh red horned devil of hell."

The foreman wheeled his horse and started back to the Double Circle. Howell spurred his mount and galloped up the hill toward the only place the sheep could be driven in from the opposite side of the mountains—Wolf Creek Pass.

IT WASN'T the first time the Verde Valley range had been threatened with an influx of sheep. Bart remembered ten years before when a great band, the consolidated flocks of half a dozen outfits had come down the east side of the mountains, from the north, much as the present band was doing.

His father had handled that situation, he remembered with a grim smile. Over at the foot of the high cliffs known as the Buttes, a great pile of bleaching bones, whitened by the suns of ten summers bore mute evidence to the fact that the cattlemen of Verde Valley meant what they said when they posted the range with warning notices that read: "No sheep." Working his way up the trail, intent on keeping his legs from being cut on overhanging rock, he rounded the jutting point of a huge granite boulder. Suddenly his horse stopped.

Square in the middle of the narrow path, sitting astride a rangy dun, with a business-like Winchester across the horn of her saddle, sat a read-headed girl. She was slender, with blue eyes that matched the steely depths of Bart Howell's own; her slim legs were shoved in old levis, her feet in battered Justins. She was surveying him calmly.

"Goin' somewhere, mister?" she asked, as unconcernedly as though she had questioned him about the weather. He noticed that the Winchester was on cock, that the muzzle swung easily as he moved.

"You the gal that's runnin' them sheep?" he countered, his eyes boring her.

Just the ghost of a smile flitted across her full lips. "I'm the gal," she replied, with a peculiar emphasis on the last word. "That is, I'm helping my dad, my brother and some new settlers. The trail is pretty narrow back as far as the split, so I thought perhaps I'd better head off anybody that might be coming up. I don't think you'll be delayed long."

Dan Howell's temper flared. Delayed! Of course he wouldn't be delayed! He controlled himself with effort.

"Now, see here, miss," he began, trying to keep annoyance from showing in his voice. "Yuh can't bring sheep intuh this valley—"

Her blue eyes turned a peculiar greenish shade and her lips tightened. "Moran is the name, mister," she cut back. "Molly Moran. You needn't tell me who you are. I've been expecting you. You're Bart Howell, the owner of the Double Circle. They told me I'd have you for a neighbor, but I don't like the way you talk. My father is an old man, my brother just a kid. The folks with us have put every cent they have in the world into this Lazy K spread, and we're going to raise sheep on it. That's all it's good for. I know how you cowmen feel about sheep, but just the same—"

There was a determined air about her that, despite himself, Bart couldn't help but admire. Still . . . .

"Look, miss," he said. "Yo're only running intuh trouble. The whole Verde Valley will be against yuh, an' that means gun-play an' killin'. Turn 'em back. Whatever yuh've put into the Lazy K, I'll see that it's returned to yuh. The spread's nothin' but rock an'—" Up the trail he could already hear the blatting of sheep as they jammed the narrow pass. "Yuh've got tuh turn back," he ordered. "They can't come beyond the split in the trail!"

"Hold it, Howell," said the girl, her voice like ice. "We hoped we could take possession of our land and put our sheep on it without trouble. Once before we were stopped, but we kept on going. This is a free country, Howell, and I'm protecting our property. If you interfere—"

Bart Howell gave a contemptuous look at the Winchester she had trained on his middle. Then with a sharp tug on the reins he twisted his horse around toward the pass.

"Don't make me do it, Howell," cried the girl, a hard glint in her eyes. "We don't want trouble, but—"

Howell didn't look at her. No girl could bluff him with a gun. He fed iron to his horse.

Bang!

Something tore at his shoulder, something that spun him in the saddle, pitched him to the ground. It was a moment before he knew what had happened . . . . she'd shot him! That damned little devil had. . . .

Then she was on her knees beside him, his head in her lap, and Bart Howell was fading into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Treatment for Sheepers!

WHEN Bart Howell regained consciousness he was at home, in his own bed. Andy Tibbets was standing beside him, as was old Doc Hudson from Lakeview.

"Missed the bone, Bart," said the doctor, when he saw his patient's eyes open. "You'll be all right in a few days. That left shoulder will be sore for a couple of weeks, but there's nothing to worry about."

After the doctor had gone, Bart turned inquiring eyes toward Andy Tibbets.

"I told yuh tuh go heeled," said the bandy-legged foreman. "Yuh might have expected them sheep-herders to try to dry gulch yuh."

"How'd I get back here to the house?" Bart asked, without replying to the foreman's comment.

"Yuh was ridin' yore hoss, comin' down the hill, but yuh didn't know it," replied Andy. "How the hell yuh ever managed tuh clean out that slug hole an' put uh bandage over it before yuh passed out, I don't know. Did yuh see who plugged yuh?"

Bart shook his head. He'd settle that matter, personally.

"Looks like the sheep outfit is in tuh stay," said Andy, ignoring the fact that Bart had showed no desire to be informed concerning the result of his attempt to stop the drive. "They're fixin' up the old ranch house an' goin' tuh dig in for a spell. A bunch uh nesters come in with 'em and I hear they're takin' up desert land east uh the Lazy K. The gal was in town when I went in tuh get Doc Hudson. Somebody must uh told her who I was, for she come over an' said I was tuh tell yuh she was sorry. Now ain't that uh hell of uh thing? Her an' her outfit busts into uh cow country with uh bunch uh stinkin' sheep, an'—she's sorry!".

Andy spat his disgust, but receiving no reply from the boss of the Double Circle, he got up and went out.

Bart Howell was not as uninterested

in what his foreman had said, as he let on. The girl was smart, all right. She had fixed up his wound, put him on his horse and headed the animal for home, knowing full well that Bart Howell would not be likely to circulate the story that he had been plugged by a girl. Well, just wait until he got on his feet . . . .

Three days later, Bart Howell mounted a horse one of the boys saddled for him. Andy Tibbets saw him, and rode up from the lower corral where he was branding some calves.

"Kind uh rushin' things, ain't yuh, Bart?" he commented. "Doc said yuh ought tuh stay in bed uh week . . . ." His eyes fell on the sixgun strapped about Bart's middle, and his jaw fell open.

"Boss," he protested, "yuh ain't goin' over there alone an' mess with that sheep outfit, are yuh? There's goin' tuh be plenty hell over thataway before long, an' uh man with one arm bunged up ain't no business messin' in—"

Bart turned sharply. "What do yuh mean 'plenty uh hell'? If yuh think—"

Andy shook his head. "It ain't what I think, Bart," he returned. "Hank Pendergast has been raisin' the devil all over the valley. He says that if the Double Circle can't keep sheep outfits off the range adjoinin', then by hell there are others who will. They started up there this mornin'."

Bart knew the temper of Hank Pendergast, and the temper of the men Hank would gather around him for a trip to the Lazy K. Pendergast had but one creed, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and the fires of hell for sheepmen. The newcomers had stirred up a hornets' nest when they had tied him up. There would be no half-way measures about his retaliation. It meant trouble, all right, if Pendergast and his men had already started for the Lazy K.

"You stay here, Andy," Bart ordered as he neck-reined his horse and started east. "There's ways uh handlin' that outfit, an' I don't mean Pendergast's way."

Andy Tibbets swore roundly. "There's jest one way tuh deal with uh sheep outfit," he growled, and made a cutting motion across his throat. "But yuh better keep out of it, Bart. Let them rannies from the Diamond Dot an' the Slash E outfits handle it."

A WEEK previous, Bart Howell would have been inclined to agree with his foreman, but now, somehow or other, he couldn't get the picture of Molly Moran out of his mind. She was a hot-headed little devil. She'd shot him down, and then dropped her gun to bandage his hurt. Why did girls like that have to be mixed up with sheep outfits?

There was a short cut he could take to reach the Lazy K. It was passable now, but most of the time Mono Creek was too deep to be forded. He reined off the little traveled trail and took the short cut. Once over the ridge, he worked his way slowly down through the brush covered slopes on the east side of the *Aguilas*. He came out on a flat about three miles from the abandoned headquarter's house of the spread, and jerked his horse to a squatting halt as he stared at the scene before him.

Damn Pendergast! There were no halfway measures with that hell roarin' oldster. Running him off with a gun and tying him to his own saddle with pigging string had brought swift retribution. A hundred head of sheep lay dead on the little flat at the foot of the mountain. Already buzzards were circling above. The war was on!

Bart rode down on the flat. His horse, scenting blood, was nervous. A single ewe, the sole survivor of the slaughter, blatted weakly and tried to run away, trailing a broken leg. Bart reached for

his gun, steadied his horse and fired without dismounting.

Still holding the gun in his hand, he rode toward the animal to make sure that it was out of its misery. Passing around the point of rock where it had fallen, he reined up shortly. Riding hell for breakfast a dozen men were coming down a side canyon from the direction of the headquarter's house of the Lazy K. Out of the corner of his eye, Bart saw them, but it wasn't the sight of the horsemen that had caused him to rein up so quickly. Just around the point of rock, far enough so that he couldn't have seen it at the time he fired, was the dead body of a man!

Instantly the thought flashed through Bart's mind that the horsemen, riding pell mell for the scene of the sheep slaughter must have heard the report of his gun. The conclusion to be drawn was entirely too obvious to Howell. They would think the worst—that he had killed the man on the ground.

Standing six feet from the body, he turned to face the galloping riders. Bent low over her saddle, Molly Moran was in the lead. The riders slid to a stop, threw themselves from their saddles and advanced upon him menacingly.

"Caught him right in the act, the damn murderer," growled one of the men, as half a dozen rifles covered Bart.

The girl looked at the body of the man on the ground, sucked in her breath sharply, and then sobbed: "My father. He's killed my dad!"

Rage swept over her. She jumped to her feet and grabbed for a rifle in a saddle holster. "I'll kill you for that, Bart Howell!" she screamed, jerking at the gun.

One of the men standing close by, kept her from pulling the rifle. "Take it easy, Molly," he said, his hot stabbing eyes turned upon Bart Howell. "We ain't takin' the law in our hands—yet."

He was scarcely more than a boy, yet in his eyes Bart Howell read just one thing—the cold, deliberate calm of a killer.

"But Billy," Molly Moran was crying, her voice pregnant with anguish, "he's killed our dad. Let me have that gun!"

Three of the men closed in on Bart Howell. Rough hands emptied the Double Circle boss's holsters, as he stood dazedly by, trying to figure out the combination of circumstances that had put him in the position he now was in.

"If there's any law in this country, yuh'll swing for this, Howell," said one of the men. "Shootin' sheep is one thing —shootin' men is somethin' else."

Bart finally found his voice. "I didn't shoot him," he protested. "There was uh ewe with uh broken leg. I put her out uh her misery, an'—"

"Yuh'll never get by with that story, Howell," said the man. "We heard the shot, saw yuh ride toward old man Moran." He laid his hand on the body of the dead man. "He's still warm. Even uh jury uh cattlemen won't stand for such uh killin'."

Still dazed with the rapidity of what had taken place, Bart Howell allowed them to bind his wrists. Resistance would be worse than useless, he realized. He was outnumbered ten to one, and the circumstances were such that death would be certain if he did not submit. It was better to try and straighten it out later.

THREE men remained behind to take care of the body, the rest ranged themselves around Bart Howell and started him off for town. Dry-eyed, her lips flattened into a thin line, Molly rode on Bart's right. Wordlessly, with only an occasional hate-filled glance, she kept her horse in step with his.

"I don't suppose there's any use tryin'

tuh explain this to yuh, Miss Molly?" he said under his voice, as they rode along.

"You'd better save your explanations until later," she replied. Then, a moment later, she added: "I'm sorry about the other day. It was a hot-tempered thing to do, plug you in the shoulder that way. But for you to take such revenge . . . ."

They cut into the main road a couple of miles above the Double Circle. Bart said nothing, but looking ahead, he saw a bunch of horsemen approaching. The others sighted the group at the same time. The approaching riders, apparently, had not yet seen Bart and his captors.

"See here," said Bart, quickly. "Yo're ridin' straight into trouble. That's uh bunch uh cowmen comin' up the pass, an' it means uh fight. Better untie me, drop back in the rocks there an' let me handle this my own way. I won't try to get away if you do . . . ."

He spoke to them generally, but in reality he was addressing himself directly to Molly Moran.

"He's right," she said, flatly. "We've got to stay within the law, even if others don't. More trouble right now wouldn't help the—the death of my father. But," and she looked straight into Bart Howell's face, "I warn you, Bart Howell, if you try to get away or start trouble—"

He knew what she meant. And he knew further that she could just as easily put a slug between his eyes as in his shoulder. "I'm promisin'," he agreed. "Untie me. Those men are headed for the Lazy K to wipe out yore sheep. There's only one way to stop 'em and that is for me to tell them I've already done it."

Billy Moran glared at Howell. "So yo're admittin' now that you did?"

"I'm admittin' nothin'," cut back Howell. "I'm only tryin' to dodge as much trouble as possible until this thing can be straightened out." He turned to Molly Moran. "I didn't kill yore dad, Miss Molly. I didn't slaughter your sheep. Will you believe that?"

And for the first time a flickering light of trust came into her eyes.

Bart was untied and left sitting his horse. The others concealed themselves in the rocks. They did not return his gun and, fearful that the empty leather would be noted, he unfastened the buckle of his belt and tossed the empty holster into the brush.

Sitting his horse in the middle of the road, Bart Howell waited for the approach of the men who were crossing the flat below. As they came nearer, his suspicion as to the identity of the group was confirmed. Hank Pendergast headed a dozen cattle men from the various spreads on the west side of the valley.

As they rounded a turn in the trail, Pendergast pulled up. He saw Bart Howell for the first time now, and he seemed to take it for granted that Howell understood his mission.

"We've decided to take this thing in our own hands, Howell," he clipped. "If the Double Circle can't keep nesters an' sheepers from squattin' in the front yard uh Verde Valley, then by hell we can. No damn red-headed female is goin' tuh make uh monkey out uh the Diamond Dot. We're goin' up an' teach them woolie-wranglers uh lesson."

Bart Howell caught his breath. He had taken it for granted that Hank Pendergast was responsible for the slaughter on the mesa above, but here was Hank with a bunch of men he had in all likelihood been rounding up for hours. It didn't add up. How could he be the man who had slaughtered the sheep and killed Molly Moran's father if—

Bart Howell knew instinctively what would happen if he didn't succeed in turning these men back. He knew that behind him, in the rocks, half a dozen men

sat with cocked rifles and itchy fingers, waiting to blast the cattlemen if they went ahead. He knew too, that Pendergast's statement had destroyed the one hope he had of proving that Pendergast, and not he, was responsible for the slaughter of the sheep and the killing of old man Moran.

"Yo're uh little late, Pendergast," said Bart Howell, sitting his horse in such a fashion that the trail was completely blocked. "I've already taken care of that."

And from the shelter of the rocks he felt sure he heard a quick gasp from Molly Moran.

CHAPTER THREE

Bushwhack Accusation

HANK PENDERGAST, heavy of shoulder and thick of neck, stared at Bart Howell. His beady eyes slitted.

"Just what d'yuh mean by that, Howell?" he demanded. "There's different ways uh takin' care uh things. These damned sheep outfits—"

Bart faced him, level-eyed. "Up on Three Pine Mesa there are over uh hundred dead sheep," he said, flatly. "If those sheep runners ain't got sense enough to take uh warnin' like that, they—"

Pendergast snorted. "Warnin', hell!" he cut back. "They had their warnin' when they come across the high desert. They had another warnin' when that red-haired female stuck me up with uh Winchester. I told her then that if she didn't get them nesters and woolie-wranglers out uh the valley we'd do it for her. We're goin' tuh clean this mess up once and for all."

He spurred his horse and tried to flank Bart Howell's mount out of the trail. The men behind Pendergast, taking their cue from their leader, forced their way up.

The sharp *spang* of a Winchester ricocheted between the rocks, close upon the whine of a warning slug that zoomed above the heads of the men crowded into the narrow pass. From the rocks, Howell heard the cold voice of Billy Moran.

"Hold it, yuh mangy cow-pokes," he shouted. "Howell's right. We've had our warnin'. Now you take yores. There's twenty of us back there on the Lazy K an' the edge uh the desert. Our pooled money bought that spread an' we aim to run our sheep there and on the range beyond. Yuh know damn well there ain't been a steer on that land in years. Keep yore side of the mountains an' we'll keep to ours. Howell killed a hundred head of our sheep today an' murdered my father. We aimed tuh take him tuh town an' get him uh fair trial—fair tuh him an' us. But there ain't no fairness in Verde Valley—that's all too damn plain. You've had *yore* warnin' now, Pendergast. There's uh dozen guns coverin' yuh from behind these rocks. Turn back. As far as Bart Howell is concerned—I'm settlin' with him personal. He shot my old man without a chanct, but I'm givin' him one. Slap some guns on yore legs Howell, because the next time I lay eyes on yuh—I'm burnin' yuh down."

Pendergast leaned close to Howell. "Yuh knowed they was there, Howell," he whispered. "Yuh let us ride into this trap!"

"Shut up," snapped Bart Howell, and then he raised his voice. "We're ridin' back," he said loudly, "but that don't mean we're through. Verde Valley is cattle country, and it's goin' tuh stay cattle country. I'm tellin' you again Moran, I didn't kill yore dad an' I don't know who did. I'll see that yo're paid back every cent yuh put into the Lazy K, but you've got tuh take them sheep back where they come from. That's the proposition. Take it or leave it, an' yuh've got just twenty-four hours tuh get out!"

Bart started his horse down the trail, and the riders who had come up with Hank Pendergast accepted his ultimatum as their own. With sullen mutterings they turned and retraced their course.

But though the men had accepted the ultimatum issued by Bart Howell, Hank Pendergast had not. Once out of hearing of the hidden sheepmen, he turned to the owner of the Double Circle.

"Damn it, Howell, yo're playin' in with them skunks. Yore lettin' 'em get uh foothold. Yuh'll be runnin' sheep yoreself, next."

Bart Howell fought hard to hold his temper. He had never liked Hank Pendergast, but the Diamond Dot man was fifteen years his senior, a hot-tempered, foul-mouthed rannahan who had blustered and bull-dozed his way to leadership in the valley.

"There's no use me an' you gettin' hot under the collar, Pendergast," he said, as they rode along. "I'm no more in favor uh them nesters an' sheepmen gettin' uh foot hold in the valley than you are; but there's been one killin' up there now, an' unless this thing is handled right, there may be more."

BRIEFLY, Bart told the owner of the Diamond Dot what had happened on the mesa, and how he had been accused of the killing of old man Moran. Pendergast seemed puzzled.

"Now who the hell yuh reckon went in there an' did that job?" he questioned. "I'm tellin' yuh flat footed, we aimed tuh wipe out them sheep our own selves, but it looks like somebody beat us to it. If you didn't do it, who the devil did? I ain't looking for uh killin' any more than anybody else, Howell, but it's plain tuh me that the old man was shot because he saw who was slaughterin' them sheep. One thing is uh cinch, them sheepers ain't above pluggin' a man. I heard in town that you was totin' around uh slug hole in yore shoulder."

There was deep-lying inquisitiveness in his glance.

"Somebody dry gulched me," lied Bart Howell. There was no use telling Pendergast too much.

Somehow or other, Bart couldn't bring himself to name Molly Moran as the one who had shot him in the shoulder. Young, hot-headed, he remembered that no sooner had the bullet ploughed its way into his shoulder than she had flung away the Winchester, and, woman-like, tried to repair the damage.

Pendergast did not seem to be entirely satisfied with the explanation. "We've got our men rounded up now, Howell," he said, and there was a note of complaint in his voice. "I'm all for cuttin' around the south end of yore spread an' by hard ridin' getting through the upper pass an' back on the Lazy K in time to—"

Howell shook his head. "I'm promisin' you, Pendergast, that I'll clean out the Lazy K an' the sheep on it too, but it'll take time. With one man dead an' uh hundred sheep slaughtered, them woolie-wranglers are goin' to be plenty hostile. The whole set-up is queer. It's more'n just uh cattle an' sheep war, I've a hunch. Gi'me a week—"

Pendergast squinted his eyes. "Yuh told 'em twenty-four hours, Howell," he cut back. "Now yo're sayin' uh week."

"I know," agreed Bart Howell. "I ain't aimin' tuh do nothin' in twenty-four hours. I didn't when I set that time limit. That warnin' is goin' to hold them nesters pretty tight together for uh couple uh days—long enough for me to work out what I'm figurin' on."

When they reached the split in the trail, where one road led to the Double Circle and the other to town, Pendergast in brief fashion explained to the men with him that he had agreed to Howell's

promise to get the nesters and sheepmen out of the valley within a week. Reluctantly, they consented to wait and, together with Pendergast, rode off toward town. Bart Howell galloped in the direction of the headquarters of the Double Circle.

As he loped along, Howell turned over in his mind Pendergast's theory that Moran had been killed by the man or men he had discovered wiping out the band of sheep. But who could it have been? Howell had heard enough talk by the men Pendergast had brought with him to know that the owner of the Diamond Dot had been hours rounding up the bunch of riders accompanying him. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind that any of those men had had any hand in the affair on Three Pine Mesa.

Bart Howell realized that the cattlemen of Verde Valley were sitting on a keg of gunpowder. He remembered the bitter sheep-cattle war that had dyed the range with blood, in the days of his father. Untold lives were lost before his father had cleared the range of sheep. And here he had taken it upon himself to do that same hard job in a week. But he had made a promise.

LONG fingers of blue shadow reached out into the lighter shades of the valley floor where the headquarters ranch of the Double Circle was situated when Bart Howell cut toward the house.

Several horses stood in front of the long porch, rein-tied to the ground, a sight that caused Howell's brows to gather questioningly. None of the Double Circle men would ride up to the house itself, much less leave horses rein-tied.

Bart's surmise was correct. As he came closer to the house, three men stepped through the door, and even at that distance Bart could recognize the bandy legs of Andy Tibbets, the Double Circle foreman. With him was Sliver Dean, the sheriff of Valley County.

"Now what the hell is old Sliver doin' out here at this time uh day?" muttered Howell as he touched spurs to the side of his horse and came up into the yard.

"Howdy, Sheriff," was Howell's greeting as he came toward the steps.

Bart grinned at the two men who stood at the elbows of Sliver Dean. One of them was Sliver's regular deputy, Ace Farnum, the other a man from Valley City who sometimes acted as a special deputy for the sheriff.

The sheriff, himself, with his black sombrero, stood head and shoulders above his men.

"Howdy, Bart," he greeted flatly. "Had uh little business up this way, an'—"

He seemed to be strangely apologetic, for Sliver Dean.

"Yeah," agreed Bart. "I just left Hank Pendergast an' his bunch down at Rock Creek Ford. He was plenty rannicky, an' all for cleanin' the sheepers out in a hurry. We got to work out some way uh handlin' this situation so that—"

Something about the expression on the face of the sheriff seemed to halt the words on Howell's lips. Back of the officer and his deputies, Bart caught a glimpse of Andy Tibbet. The foreman's eyes were troubled, his look serious.

"Uh huh," agreed Sheriff Dean, slowly. "Pendergast seems tuh think that he can handle things now the way they were handled years ago. Killin's are pretty serious, Bart, and—"

Howell looked up quickly. Sliver Dean certainly got around in a hurry, if he knew about old man Moran's murder, already. Of course the road the lawman had followed from town was considerably shorter than the trail Bart had taken from Rock Creek, but unless the sheriff had met some of Pendergast's bunch . . . .

Bart kicked his boots against the

scraper screwed to the steps, and stomped onto the porch. "Tell Lem Kee tuh hustle up the grub, Andy," he ordered, then turned to Sheriff Dean: "You an' the boys better stay an' eat, Sliver. We had quite uh fracas up there this afternoon. I'll tell you all about it."

Sliver Dean did not move, nor did his serious expression change in the slightest. "Reckon we'll eat in town, Bart," he replied, and his voice seemed strained and forced. "Mebby yuh better have Andy saddle uh fresh hoss for yuh."

Bart Howell's eyes flashed full at the sheriff. "For me?" he countered.

The sheriff took a deep breath. "Sorry, Howell," he returned crisply, "but I'm takin' yuh to town on uh charge of—murder!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Prisoner by Proxy

FOR an instant, Bart Howell stood transfixed, stunned. Then his mind began working with lightning-like rapidity. Something was wrong here. If the sheriff had had time to come out from town to make an arrest in such a formal manner, that meant that somebody had made a charge in the usual way. Who could have gotten back to town from the scene of the killing with such dispatch as to insure the sheriff being at the Double Circle by the time Bart arrived? Not only that, but such a person must have known what had really happened in the canyon.

"I suppose yuh got uh warrant, Sliver?" Bart asked, and he was surprised at the level quality of his own voice.

"Shore have," the officer assured him. "All made out in the regular way, signed by Judge Tyrell, an'—"

"Who made the complaint?" the ranch owner interrupted.

Sliver Dean's response took Bart's breath away. "Uh gal named Molly Moran. She claims tuh own the Lazy K."

Hot protest rushed to Bart's lips, but he stifled it instantly. There was no use tipping his hand by telling everything he knew. It was twenty miles from Valley City to the Double Circle ranch. Even riding hard, it would take the sheriff two hours to make the trip. No one could have covered the distance from Three Pine Mesa into Valley City in less than two hours and since the girl had been with the bunch in the canyon no more than three hours before it was clearly impossible for her to have ridden into town and made the charge against him.

"What sort of lookin' gal is this Molly Moran?" Bart asked.

"Not so big," the sheriff cut back. "She's about nineteen or twenty, I reckon. Red hair—an' plenty hostile about the way she claims her dad was plugged." He eyed Bart Howell, shrewdly. "But I wouldn't say nothin' right now, if I was you, Bart," he said, and there was an undercurrent of kindness in his tone. "Under the law I gotta warn yuh that anything yuh say might be used against yuh."

Bart nodded. "Saddle the black for me, Andy," he told the foreman, and, without further conversation, he and the sheriff walked down to the horse corral.

Andy helped Bart switch the saddle from the horse he just came in on, to the black. As the foreman leaned down to pull the latigo under the belly of the animal, he whispered: "Midnight, boss, we'll—"

The sheriff turned his head just at that moment, and the foreman clipped the words short. There was no opportunity for Bart Howell to disagree with the suggestion made by his foreman. He knew, as well as if Andy Tibbet had explained in detail, just what the crooked-legged ramrod of the Double Circle had in mind.

It was a plan for jail delivery. That meant more law-breaking . . . .

"It's too late tuh do anything tonight," announced Bart, hoping that the foreman would get the significance of the remark. "I'll have a talk with Lawyer Atwood in the mornin' Sliver, an' mebby he can fix it up with the judge tuh change the charge to a lesser degree, an' get me out on bail."

Andy's lower jaw tightened, but he refused to look at Bart Howell. Despite the implied suggestion contained in this remark, Bart knew that Andy and the Double Circle men would handle the matter of bail in their own way.

It was after nine o'clock before Sheriff Dean lodged his prisoner in the tiny jail at Valley City and Bart had cleaned up a plate of ham and eggs.

"I'm damned sorry about this, Bart," said the sheriff as he prepared to lock the jail for the night.

Bart rolled a cigarette and sat on the edge of the single bunk the solitary cell afforded. "Yuh needn't apologize, Sliver," he told the lawman.

Afterwards, worried and perplexed, Bart Howell sat on the edge of the bunk, until the oil lamp outside his cell sputtered, smoked and went out. . . .

IN THE distance, Bart Howell could hear the night sounds of the small cowtown of Valley City; the tin-pan echo of the piano at The Roost, the raucous shrieking of a cowboy who had taken a drink too many. Outside the single window of the cell a night bird called.

Perhaps, Bart told himself, rolling one cigarette after another, Andy's plan hadn't been so bad. There was something queer about the whole set-up, something that, when once understood, would throw an entirely different light on the killing of Dan Moran.

A small rock around which was wrapped a piece of paper came through the bars, fell at Bart's feet. He scratched a match, and read the scrawl.

> We'll rope out the bars. Catch one rope and we will pull you up to the window. Whistle if you understand.

Bart looked at the barred window ten feet above the cell floor. There was no chance of a prisoner working at those bars from the inside and loosening them; neither was there a chance for anybody tampering with them from the outside. But the combined strength of ropes fastened to two or three saddle horns—might do the trick!

For a moment he hesitated. He knew only too well what delays could be expected of the law. He needed to be free, if he wanted to solve the killing of Moran.

With sudden resolve he pursed his lips into a sibilant whistle, low in pitch, but sufficiently loud to reach the ears of the men outside.

One by one the *hondas* of three ropes dropped over the sill above his head. One by one he tossed them back, making sure that each one of them circled two bars. Then he waited. The ropes tightened, the brick-work gave—and a hole big enough to permit his passage appeared!

A single rope came through the opening, fell at his feet. He made a loop in the end, placed his foot in it and tugged. A moment later he had worked himself through the window opening.

The drop of five feet to the ground sent him to his knees, but he was up instantly.

"Good work, Andy," he whispered, although he could not see the foreman.

Suddenly two men were upon him from behind.

"Sorry tuh disappoint yuh, Howell," said a voice that Bart recognized as that of Billy Moran. "We got tuh thinkin' things over an' we decided that mebbyso

since cowmen take the law in their own hands, it wouldn't be such a bad idea fer us tuh try it our own selves."

Bart Howell didn't know what to do, for the moment. If he cried out he would only disclose his escape from jail. Once returned to a cell, he never again would be able to escape. Even though his captors planned to lynch him, there was still a chance. . . .

"Just what's the idea, Moran?" he asked, as he was thrown aboard a horse. "You know damn well yuh can't get away with this. Yuh'll have every cattle man in the county on your tail if you plan any neck-tie party."

Billy Moran, who had brought his horse up from the rear and who was riding beside Bart Howell as they headed toward the hills, chuckled mirthlessly.

"Kind of borryin' trouble, ain't yuh, Howell?" he asked. "Nobody said anything about a lynchin' bee. We ain't crazy enough for that. We got uh better idea." He held out his hand, palm up. "Looks like we might have uh wettin'," he said, unconcernedly. "If it should rain hard up in the mountains, it's plumb likely Mono Creek will be runnin' pretty full by mornin'. Be too bad if uh feller busted out uh jail an' started over the short cut by the falls an' fell in, wouldn't it?"

BART HOWELL set his jaw tightly. So that was it! They were going to make it appear to be an accident. But how did Billy Moran, supposedly a newcomer in the valley, know so much about Mono Creek?

The steep pitch of the stream was a veritable death trap of sharp rocks against which the turbulent waters would hurl a man's body with force enough to batter life out in a few minutes. Bart remembered having once seen the body of a horse that had been caught in the foaming crest of a flood down that short, precipitous canyon . . . .

He kept his mouth shut from then on, trying to figure some way out.

There were three men with Billy Moran, not one of whom Bart remembered as having been with the party the afternoon before. The rain increased, soaking Bart to the skin.

Twenty-five yards from the falls, they were brought to a sudden halt. The order to stop was harsh and explosive; a sound that every one of the men understood only too well—the sharp crack of a rifle. The flash of the gun stabbed from behind a rock on the opposite side of the creek.

"Billy," snapped the incisive voice of Molly Moran, "you can't do it. Lem Trainer told me what you were up to. Two wrongs never make a right. You'll be just as guilty as—as the man who killed dad."

Bart Howell noticed with grim satisfaction that the girl did not name him as the murderer of her father.

"You keep out of this, Molly," ordered Billy Moran. "These cowmen have got tuh be taught that when they take the law in their own hands, other folks can do the same. Come down here!"

Bart caught his breath when the girl obeyed. She slid down to the side of the rushing stream and stood on a flat rock two feet above the water.

"You're making a terrible mistake, Billy," she pleaded, standing with the rifle in her hands, her form illuminated by the constant flashes of lightning. "There's a chance of straightening this trouble out as it stands, but if you do what you're planning, we'll be outlawed."

Too late Bart caught a glimpse of what one of the men with Billy Moran was doing. He was building a loop from a rope that hung at his saddle, and he was doing it with a dexterity that spoke long practice. No sheeper could have built a loop like that.

"Molly!" Bart yelled. "Go back! *Go back!*"

At the next flash of lightning, the man threw the rope, and it settled over her shoulders. She saw it coming, threw up the hand in which she held the rifle, knocked the rope aside, but lost her balance and fell into the roaring water.

"Yuh damned fool," screamed Bart Howell, exerting every ounce of his strength against the loosening ropes that bound his wrists, "you've killed her."

He booted his horse into the water, just as a gun in the hands of one of the sheepers cracked out. The terrific force of the water hurled him against the jagged rocks that cropped up out of the water. If he hadn't been tied to his saddle he would have been lost. A final jerk and his arms came free. He untied his legs, twisted his fingers into the mane of the horse. A hail of shots was pelting the water about him.

In the whirlpool fifty feet below where he had entered the creek, something bumped against him—the unconscious form of Molly Moran. He grabbed at her with his left hand and held on.

The threshing animal jammed Bart between two upright slabs of rock. Striving not to lose his hold on the girl, he lost his grip on the horse's mane. The animal turned sideways, disappeared in the raging current. Bart Howell pulled himself into the wedge between the rocks still holding tightly to the girl. And then his brain went dark with unconsciousness. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Black Sheep Pay Off

GRAY dawn was tipping the mountain tops when Bart Howell regained his senses. The water had receded. There was a long red welt on the forehead of the girl he held in his arms. He got out of the crevice, laid her down on a flat, sandy spot beside the creek and rubbed her hands and arms to restore circulation. Finally she opened her eyes.

"We must have come up for air somewhere around the Rio Grande," she said. "I—" She hesitated, a bit of restraint in her tone, as she realized that she and the man against whom all her interests were arrayed had come close to death, and that only his strong arms had saved her from being killed.

Bart Howell remembered it too. For a moment he seemed to be at a loss for words. "I'm sorry you felt yuh had tuh make that complaint against me, Miss Molly," he said slowly at last. "I was rather hopin' yuh'd take my word for it. Even though it might have looked like I was guilty."

"Make what complaint?" she countered. "I made no complaint against you."

Bart Howell's jaw dropped. "The sheriff said yuh signed uh complaint yesterday, charging me with killin' yore dad," he told her, and his voice was tense.

She shook her head. "One of our men rode up to the Lazy K last night and said that you'd been put in jail," she replied. "He said that Billy had rounded up some hot-heads and planned on breaking you out and—" She stopped short, her breath quickening. "Jim Blalock's daughter!" she said, the words tumbling rapidly from her lips. "She was with Billy yesterday. She looks a little like me, has red hair too. She'd do anything Billy told her to do!"

Bart Howell was thinking fast. "Try and remember just what time you saw her," he questioned. "Was it before or after you reached Three Pine Mesa?"

She turned a puzzled glance toward him. "It was before," she replied, a glint of worry appearing in her eyes. "She rode off toward town with a man Billy sent—"

He hesitated to put into words the

thought he knew was in her mind. *"Before your dad was killed!"* he breathed. "Molly, that killin' was planned. They sent that girl in to make that charge, passin' herself off as you, knowin' that nobody in town would notice the difference. They were so darned sure the thing was going to work out the way they had planned it, that they got the girl started for town *ahead* of the killin', so that the sheriff would be back in time to grab me."

Molly's forehead wrinkled. "But that would mean that Billy—" She broke off.

"Did Billy ride into the canyon with you?" he asked her directly.

"No," she answered. "He came in from a coulee just before we reached the place where dad—" She hesitated for a long moment, and then added: "Surely you don't think Billy—"

He nodded his head in assent. "Somebody spotted me on my way up from the Double Circle," he said. "They got up to the mesa ahead of me, slaughtered the sheep, killed yore dad in cold blood. The stage was set and I played right into it. Who was the man that went to town with the Blalock girl?"

"I didn't get a good look at his face," she replied, "but he was riding a skewball black and white. He got on his horse from the *right* side."

Bart Howell took a quick breath. "Limpy McCall," he whispered to himself. "He's a Diamond Dot man."

Molly looked at Bart with questioning eyes. "But Hank Pendergast is the owner of the Diamond Dot," she countered. "Why would he play in with a deal to have you charged with murder, and why would my brother—"

AS THEY talked, they had been walking toward the flat land below the canyon where the creek mushroomed out into a lush grass meadow. A mile away, a group of horsemen were coming across the flat at a lope.

"That's Andy Tibbets and the boys from the Double Circle," announced Bart Howell. "Something's up."

He kept his eyes on the approaching horsemen as he asked her one final question: "How many of those nesters that came in with your sheep do you actually know, Miss Molly?"

She was thoughtful for a moment, and then answered: "Well, come to think of it, I don't know any of them. It was Billy's idea to come down into this country with the sheep. He got the men together."

Bart Howell's lips firmed. He understood now why the man with Billy Moran was so handy with a rope; he understood, too, why the men who had been with Molly and her brother in the canyon the day before had sat their horses like men who had spent their lives in the saddle. Sheepmen, like hell! *They were cattlemen!* Gunslicks, every one of them.

Andy Tibbets and the Double Circle riders slid to a halt. The ramrod slipped off his horse with an expression of relief when he saw Bart Howell.

"Hell's bells, Bart—beggin' yore pardon, miss—" exclaimed the cowboy. "Where yuh been? Yuh look like yuh been clawed by uh cougar. We been searching the whole country for yuh. We came tuh town last night tuh bust yuh out of jail, like I said we would. When we got there somebody else had done beat us to it." He stopped shortly and looked at the girl. Then added: "We're on our way up tuh clean out that sheep outfit."

Bart Howell's eyes glinted. "Just a minute, Andy," he said. "Whose idea is that?"

"Hank Pendergast's," answered the foreman, promptly. "He's got it all fixed. Him and the Diamond Dots are comin'

in from the north. We're to swing around the south rim an' come up from there."

Bart Howell shook his head. "We'll do nothin' of the sort, Andy," he countered. "Unless I miss my guess by a hundred miles, Pendergast is workin' the biggest double-cross that was ever pulled off in this county. We'll go in from the *west* side an' find out what the Diamond Dot outfit is up to."

Bart turned to the girl. "Miss Molly, I told yuh I didn't kill yore dad. I think I can prove it, if you'll trust me. But I'm afraid what yuh'll learn this day will hurt yuh uh lot. I think it was yore brother that killed yore dad."

For a moment her face blanched, then her jaw set rigidly, but she remained silent.

"We've got extra hosses," said Andy. "I brought yore guns too, Bart. If the gal is in on the play though—"

"I'll answer for her," Howell snapped. "I want you boys to split. Andy, you take six men an' follow the original plan. Do just what Pendergast told yuh to do, but don't gun them sidewinders until I say so. If yuh do, yuh'll run into uh passel of pure unadulterated hell, 'cause they're no more sheep-herders or nesters than we are. They're uh bunch of imported gunslicks. I'll take six men an' come in from the west. Molly, you ride with me."

A minute later the two groups were on their way. They climbed higher into the mountains, then started down the opposite side. The girl finally asked: "Why is Pendergast doing this? I thought he was the one who wanted us out of the valley."

Bart Howell smiled slightly. "That's just what Pendergast wanted yuh to think," he said, shortly. "In fact that's just what he wanted us *all* to think."

Bart reined up, and asked one of the men for a pair of glasses. With them he scanned the rocky valley below.

"Thought so," he said between his teeth. "Pendergast and his men *and* uh bunch of them so-called sheep wranglers. They're workin' together, Molly, an' yore brother is with 'em. It's uh trap tuh wipe out the Double Circle."

"They're askin' for it," grunted Stubby McDaw. "Let's give it to 'em."

"Then ride," ordered Howell, shoving the heavy sixguns on his legs around toward the front. "Molly," he added, "you stay here until—" What he saw in her face cut the words short.

"I was no party to this thing, Bart Howell," she said crisply. "I wouldn't have stood for it in the beginning and I won't now. If my brother killed my dad—then he'll answer to me."

ON THE flat below, the Diamond Dot men and the renegades had opened fire, part of them circling to flank Andy Tibbets and his men. Under such an attack the bandy-legged foreman wouldn't last long. There was no time now, except for action. Howell spurred his horse, and with his men hot on his heels galloped toward the battle which centered in a gulley at the lower end of the Lazy K yard.

Despite the fact they were outnumbered, Andy and his bunch were giving a good account of themselves—so much so that the renegades were backing up toward a wagon shed a hundred yards from the house. Bart scattered his men, and they took shelter in the ranch house itself. While Tibbets and his men were dropping one after another of the outlaws, Bart Howell joined in.

In the excitement of the moment, Bart Howell had forgotten about the girl. Hunkered down behind a window sill he fired steadily, emptied one gun, laid it aside and pulled the other. When he stopped to reload, a fresh gun was shoved

into his hand, and he faced Molly Moran.

"I'll load for you," she said simply.

One of the outlaws had spotted Howell's hiding place and was using a rifle, firing at the flash of the cattleman's gun. Glass from the lower square of the old-fashioned window tinkled down over Bart's head. A sliver of it cut his hand. Without a word the girl tore a strip from her waist, bound the cut and started loading again.

"Got most of 'em," he grunted at last, turning a smoke-stained face toward her. "There can't be—" He was handing her his empty, hot-barreled Colt, the trigger guard flat in the palm of his hand, and reaching for the fresh gun with his left.

"Like hell you have," snarled a voice almost at his elbow.

"Billy!" The girl's exclamation was stunned, hushed.

"Don't move yore hands, Howell," said the boy, menacingly. "When they start shootin' again you'll get it. I ain't fool enough tuh fire uh shot inside this room an' have 'em know. . . ."

"Billy," said the girl again, and her voice was a sob. "Billy you can't—"

"Can't, huh?" he clipped. "This polecat spoiled the biggest deal of my life. I'd have been rich if this had worked out. Pendergast promised—" He seemed to realize he was saying too much.

"Why don't yuh finish it, Billy," whispered Bart Howell, watching him with stabbing eyes. "Why don't you tell how Pendergast got yuh to have Molly take tax title to the Lazy K, how he got yuh to bring in uh bunch uh sheep an' fake nesters, all the time plannin' to wipe out the Double Circle."

"How the hell did yuh know that?" asked Billy Moran, his finger tightening over the trigger of his gun.

"Pendergast wanted tuh run sheep on the Diamond Dot and the high desert," Howell went on. "But he had to have the Double Circle to do it. He knew he couldn't buy it, so he planned to wipe us out like he wiped out that hundred head of sheep—by trying to start a war between the cattlemen and his imported gunslicks. He even had you murder your own father, an' tried to pin it on me!"

A baleful sneer crept over Billy Moran's thin lips.

"My father? He wasn't my father any more than he was Molly's. He got both of us out of uh orphanage . . . ."

From one of the other rooms came a shout: "They're comin' up! Let 'em have it."

"That means you too, Howell," said the pale-faced killer. He raised his gun.

The sudden reverberation of the .45, fired almost in his ear, stunned Bart Howell momentarily. For an instant he thought the flash had come from the gun in the hand of Billy Moran. Then he saw Molly Moran staring at the slumped body of the man she had called her brother, a thin wisp of blue smoke curling from the barrel of her Colt.

"He killed the only father I ever knew," she whispered tensely. "He was going to kill you. . . ."

Bart Howell put his arm around her, held her close. And in that moment he knew he had found someone from whom only death could part him.

Hank Pendergast lived long enough to confirm Bart Howell's suspicions. He had planned and executed the whole affair, hoping to be able to run sheep on the east side of the valley and cattle on the west. He had known that he couldn't straddle the fence and still retain his standing as a cattleman and so he planned to work through Billy Moran.

But Verde Valley was, and remained, cattle country. No one ever attempted to run sheep on the Lazy K again, for, title to the spread came into the hands of Bart Howell and the Double Circle—through marriage. . . .

THE END

The Smoky River War

If Blaze McCloud, outlaw cowpuncher, didn't help move those hungry Texas cattle into the lush range of the Smoky, Blaze would either be in boothill or on his way to prison hell. And if he did shove the cattle on, he'd be waging a heartless, bloody war against the only two people in Wyoming he wanted to call friends!

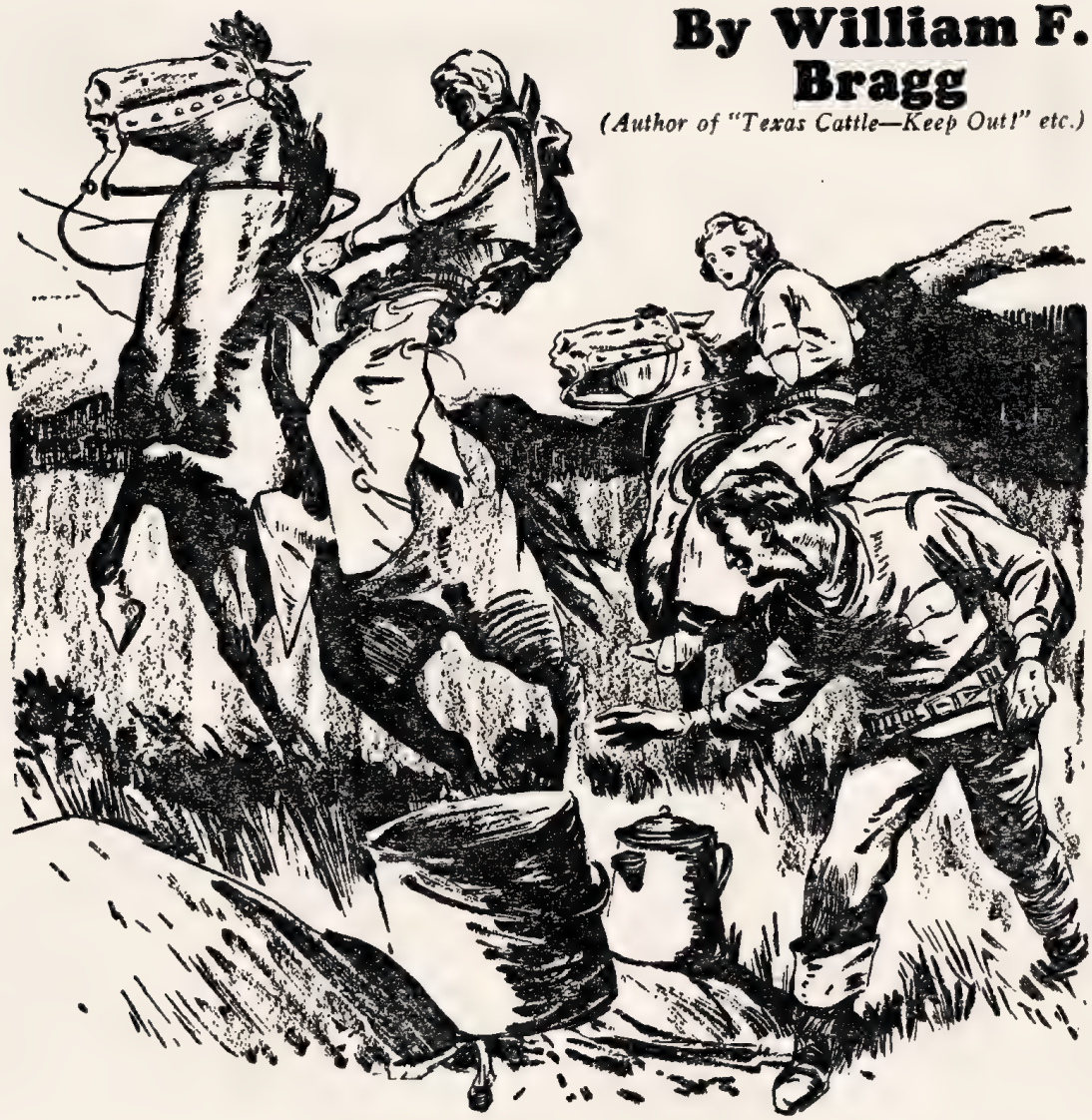
BLAZE McCLOUD sat comfortably in the shade of the Box Four chuckwagon, his eyes on the plate of hot dinner he had just taken from the cook's dutch ovens. But his ears were closely attentive to the loud talk in progress between Bunch Rogan, the wealthy cattleman, and a young stranger who had ridden into camp on a pinto.

On the grassy flat, a quarter mile from camp, grazed two thousand Southwestern cattle that Rogan was buying and rebranding to turn out on local ranges. Between that herd and the camp, punchers were jogging in for the noon meal.

It was a peaceful scene, with longhorns to their knees in rich grass, blue peaks reaching to the sky, and a cool, fresh wind in the timber. But Blaze had heard a threat passed between Rogan and the

By William F. Bragg

(Author of "Texas Cattle—Keep Out!" etc.)



Man-sized novelette of old Wyoming

stranger—a threat that meant war if Rogan drove the cattle east and attempted to crowd an already overstocked range.

That threat interested Blaze, for he had hired out a week before at top wages to Mojave Joe Crone to move these cattle to the Smoky. Now Blaze knew that the extra money the Box Four was paying him was for his gun in case of war, rather than for driving Texas dogies.

"I'm payin' forty thousand dollars for these cattle," Blaze heard Rogan growling. And at that, he straightened to attention. Any man, in Blaze's estimation, who could dig up that much money for a herd was worth listening to. The lean cowpuncher forgot his dinner, cuffed back his hat, and lounged against the wagon.

Squatted in the shade of the rear wagon wheel sat Mojave Joe, the beady-eyed, sharp-nosed dealer, who had hired Blaze at top money to aid in delivering the herd to Rogan. Mojave Joe, who ordinarily paid strict attention to his meal, was also listening. And there was a cold grin on his black-whiskered face.

Bunch Rogan stood ten feet away, leering into the face of the slim rider in batwing chaps, flannel shirt, and wide-brimmed hat who sat astride a restive

pinto pony. Rogan had laid one red hand, on the pony's bridle bit.

"Now don't ride away mad," coaxed Bunch. "Git down an' eat with us boys. We're all nice fellows here."

"Turn my horse loose!" flamed the slim rider. "I've said my little say, Rogan. I've told you that it means war if you turn those cattle out on the lower river range. *War,* Rogan. The settlers are riding for the pass. I came here believing you'd be a big enough man to forget profit and remember that not only men, but women and children will suffer if you turn your hired gunfighters and your scrawny Texas dogie cattle loose on good Smoky grass."

Rogan curved his thick lips in what was intended as a pleasant smile. "All you got to say," he drawled, "is the *big word.* You know what I mean. Jest smile with them purty red lips an' say real polite that Bunch Rogan stands ace-high with yuh, an' them cattle will never move another foot east from this flat."

Blaze McCloud turned slowly, whispered to Mojave Joe Crone. "Say—that blonde kid is really a gal."

Crone shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Shore, what'd yuh think she was, a spring calf or somethin'? An' she can jest about wrap Bunch Rogan around her leetle finger. That's Sally Starling."

The bright-eyed Sally now leaned over her saddle-horn. Her hat was tilted back, exposing a tangle of yellow curls that gleamed like gold under the mountain sun. She raised a quirt and snapped it as she stared down into Rogan's beefy red face.

"I'll never say the word you want, Bunch Rogan. If I did, my own father would throw me out of house and home. Take your hand off that bridle. I've given fair warning. Now—" and she flipped back the threatening quirt over a slim shoulder for a slash at Rogan.

CRONE muttered in Blaze McCloud's ear. "You'd think a poverty-stricken sagehen like that Starlin' spitfire would throw herself into the arms of ol' Bunch. Him that's got enough mazuma tuh buy an' sell out half the Smoky River settlers."

Bunch, shortening his grip on the bridle reins, had reached out suddenly with his free arm and seized the toe of Sally's right boot. Now he was attempting to draw the angry girl off the pony.

"You'll stay to dinner!" he shouted, rocking with laughter. "And you'll pay for yore chuck with a kiss. Mebbe two or three—"

A bay pony, with an Anchor Bar brand similar to the one on Sally's pinto, galloped into camp. Another blond rider sat there, but he was wide-shouldered and hard where Sally was slim and soft. He checked abruptly, went for a gun and lined it on Rogan.

"Take yore hog hands off that pinto's bit!" the newcomer warned, "or I'll throw enough lead into yuh Rogan to ballast a buckin' fuzztail!"

Rogan sullenly freed the pony and stepped back. He stood glowering, not daring to reach for the gun that sagged from his belt. The boy cried to Sally.

"What made yuh loco enough to ride into this camp? I been trailin' yuh."

The girl half-sobbed, "Oh, Jimmy, I—I thought I'd stop this war. I hoped Rogan might be man enough to listen."

"Rogan's a hog," Jimmy stated flatly. "And the only way to reason with him is with a gun!"

Rogan snarled, "My hands are up. If you kill me, Starling, it will be murder."

Jimmy Starling sneered. "The hog prays for his life." He motioned to the girl. "Turn yore hoss, Sis. Git outa this camp. You don't belong here."

Punchers were jogging in from the herd. In the lead, Blaze McCloud marked

the lanky figure of his riding mate, old Sorrowful Suggs.

Sally Starling tossed her head spitefully, but she obeyed her angry brother. She reined the pinto out of bullet line. Then she halted, watching Bunch Rogan.

In the little instant of silence that now fell over the camp Blaze McCloud heard the scrape of Mojave Joe's calloused fingers against leather. He looked from the corner of his eye, marked that Joe was leaning forward, that he had drawn his gun and was ready to throw a bullet through Jimmy Starling's back. The boy didn't know he was covered from the rear. But Bunch Rogan did.

"Put yore gun up," Rogan snarled, "or ol' Jim Starlin' will come up with a boy missin'."

"I didn't figure to kill yuh, Rogan," flamed Jimmy. "It's my intention to git off this hoss an' beat in yore ugly face. After that—if yuh'd like to match hot lead—it's a go with me."

JIMMY eased in the saddle, ready to swing to the ground. Rogan crooked the fingers of his left hand which was high in the air. Mojave Joe Crone jumped up, gun swinging upward for the death blast. Sally Starling saw and screamed.

Blaze McCloud, an easy grin on his tanned face, flipped his cup and threw scalding coffee into Mojave Joe's eyes, just as Crone's gun roared. The cattle dealer's bullet whistled over Jimmy Starling's head. Crone, cursing wildly, wiped the hot coffee from his face.

Rogan, amazed at the sudden attack by the gray-eyed gunfighter who drew top money from Mojave Joe, hesitated one moment too long. Blaze, up on his lean saddle-warped legs, buzzed a bullet between Rogan's boots, snapped another past Rogan's hairy right ear, and put a third through the top of Rogan's hat.

Crone, eyes clearing, sought to throw his gun on Blaze. Blaze laughed, swung a haymaker with his Colt barrel and knocked Joe flat on the ground.

Sally Starling quirted her pinto to life, charged the roundup cook, who had grabbed a sawed-off shotgun and was lining on Blaze. She ran her pony through the campfire, and the mount's flying heels sent dutch ovens and pots flying.

Blam! The cook had pulled both triggers before he had set the stock of the old ten gauge firmly against his shoulder The recoil flung him back on his heels. Two loads of buckshot cut splinters from the wagon box just above McCloud.

Jimmy Starling tried hard to get into the fight. But the blast of gunfire had thrown his bay mount into a spasm of bucking.

Box Four punchers, including old Sorrowful, approaching the camp, rushed in.

Two men saw Jimmy's frantic bay stamping, and they fanned out to head him, their guns barking. The kid swung his horse, determined to return to camp even though a dozen guns barred his way. But his horse got the bit in its teeth, bogged its head, and began to pitch.

As Sally crashed through the array of dutch ovens, Blaze McCloud leaped over Mojave Joe's prostrate body, and put a bullet through the cook's right arm just as the latter had whirled to smash Sally's pinto across its nose with his shotgun.

The cook went down with a yell. Sally jumped her snorting pony across him and rounded the wagon. Bunch Rogan, given his chance because of the cook's interference, had jerked his Colt and started to advance on Blaze. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

One Thousand Dollars Reward!

BLAZE ducked behind the wagon as Rogan's weapon began hammering. Encouraged by the thud of hoofs, as

Box Four punchers galloped up, Rogan shouted, "I'll git yuh, yuh outlaw snake!"

McCloud nodded grimly. His horse had broken its reins and stampeded at the first burst of fire. He was afoot in a hostile camp, and a dozen men would soon be closing with him. He flipped his gun intending to throw the last slug through Bunch Rogan's middle.

A girl screamed above a drumming of frantic hoofs. "Grab for the stirrup!"

Blaze whirled on his peg-heeled boots, saw Sally Starling spurring past the wagon on her wall-eyed pinto. A stirrup hung free. Blaze seized the leather, high up, was swept off the ground by the rush of the pony and thrown behind the saddle.

Rogan yelled to his men. "Git 'em both! A thousand dollars to the one that takes man or gal!"

Whooping punchers pointed their mounts after Sally's pinto, forgot that Jimmy Starling, still fighting his stubborn bay, was an easier catch.

Old Sorrowful Suggs jumped his mount in the path of one reckless rider, jerked his gun and ripped out. "Turn back, yuh polecat!"

But the rider quirted his horse down both flanks, crashed into Suggs' mount, and knocked the animal down as Sorrowful's gun exploded. Blaze McCloud saw the fall of his partner, as Sally galloped toward where her brother fought his bay.

Blaze shouted above the thunder of hoofs, "Skirt the herd! Git across the river!" Then he dropped off the pinto.

Unaware that Blaze had dropped off, intent on her brother's peril, Sally raced toward the river. As she came up, she reversed her quirt, leaned forward, struck the bay between its pinned-back ears with the shot-loaded butt. Up came the cayuse's head, giving Jimmy slack on the reins. He tightened his grip, and stuck his boot through the stirrup he had lost.

"Come on!" Sally cried. "The man with me thinks we should cross the river!"

Jimmy's eyes bulged. "Man with you?" he asked. "What man?"

Sally turned, amazed, and for the first time saw that Blaze was gone. Then, as her eyes flashed backward over her trail, she glimpsed the lean gunfighter running toward his unhorsed partner.

"That man," Sally half sobbed. "He —he saved us. We must help him."

Jimmy nodded. "That's right. But you —you get across that river. This is a man's fight."

She sought to swing her mount, but swift as the strike of a rattler, Jimmy slashed the pinto down one sleek flank with his quirt. Before the girl could tighten the reins, the frightened horse was running wild toward the Smoky.

Jimmy Starling whirled his bay and galloped toward Blaze McCloud who stood ready for action, above has partner's sprawled frame.

CAUGHT in the open, Blaze boldly faced Rogan's punchers as they fanned around him like a circle of whooping redskins. Suggs hadn't opened his eyes. He had hit on the top of his head and his face was the color of wax.

As Blaze looked down on his senseless partner, he realized that by his reckless stepping into a fight, he had also drawn faithful old Suggs along the road to death.

"All because I threw my coffee in Mojave Joe's face," growled Blaze. "Jest to save a fool kid an' his sister that I never saw before—and who I likely won't see again."

The hoarse orders of Bunch Rogan rang above the gallop of ponies. "Three men ride for that pass down the river. Then the gal won't be able to git outa this basin unless she heads over Packsaddle Mountain."

As three punchers clattered away, Bunch halted his men, slowly approached

the lean gunman who guarded his partner. Bunch called to him.

"You got no show!" he cried. "Lay down yore guns!"

Blaze grinned, nodded. But he didn't obey. "I can take a couple of you hombres with me," he pointed out.

A sudden cry rent the air. Jimmy Starling had emerged from a shallow draw that led toward the river. His approach had been unnoticed until he spurred toward Blaze, rowels flashing.

Sixgun held ear-high, Jimmy yelled, "Grab a handful of stirrup!"

It was the same plan Sally had used to rescue Blaze from the camp. But then there hadn't been Sorrowful Suggs to consider. With the rattle of hoofs, the bay dashed past Blaze. But Blaze didn't reach for the stirrup.

Rogan, a thin grin printed on the big mouth under his red moustache, gestured to his waiting men. They rushed Jimmy Starling, surrounded him, knocked him off his horse with a gunstock. A half dozen punchers, sweeping away from that fight, bore down on Blaze McCloud. Rogan had remained on a little knoll to deal out orders. A man able to buy $40,000 worth of cattle could hire others to do his fighting for him.

So the forty-dollar-a-month gang rushed Blaze McCloud. Forty dollars a month, except Mojave Joe. The cattle-dealer was out to get revenge for that cup of hot coffee that Blaze had thrown in his face.

Blaze dropped to his knees. As a rider, he knew that it was exceedingly difficult to force a well-broken horse to run down a man—or to face the red flash of a barking Colt. His gun hand twitched. But he held his fire until Mojave Joe, riding hard in the lead, came within range.

Then Blaze thumbed the hammer. He had eaten and worked with the men who followed Joe. In his heart there was no hate for them, nor a desire to kill. But when a man desired his life, as did Mojave Joe, then it was a different matter. His first bullet cut the sod under the nose of Joe's pony, his second stung the animal on the left shoulder. It turned aside, was caught by the headlong rush of following steeds, and knocked off balance.

HORSEMEN swung out of the dusty haze that spurted up where horses bucked and bawled. They saw that Blaze had shouldered Suggs, was retreating toward the draw from which Jimmy had come.

One rider unstrapped his rope, circled Blaze, shook out a loop. His mates reined down, maintained a careful distance.

One man bent and raked a Winchester carbine from its scabbard. When Blaze saw the short rifle flash into sight, he knew that for the present the game was up. He could never reach the draw. Nor with his gun could he outrange the .30-.30.

As the rifleman raised the weapon, Blaze dropped Suggs' limp body, stepped in front of it. He snapped a bullet. It whistled above the rifleman's head, but it served to hurry the man's trigger finger. The bullet that would have drilled Blaze, glanced off the flat face of a nearby rock.

"Raise yore sights!" Blaze yelled.

He was aware that a rider had circled him, but he dared not turn his back. He stood braced in front of his partner, narrowed eyes on the watchful crew that crossed and recrossed his front.

In the rear, Joe Crone had quieted his bullet-stung pony. Other men had taken the wire edge off Jimmy Starling's temper. And Bunch Rogan was now riding forward to supervise the capture or killing of the tall man who had started the fight.

"The showdown," muttered Blaze.

It had come. The day that Sorrowful Suggs had warned him of for years.

On this day, and in this moment, Blaze McCloud grew up. It was not that he feared death. But old Sorrowful had been like a father to him in the days when Blaze was a big-eyed waif in San Antone, sleeping in a livery barn. Sorrowful had found the lad, taken him under his wing, put him on a cattle outfit's payroll as a horse wrangler, schooled Blaze in all the work with rope, saddle, and running iron, that made up a cowpoke's education.

"Ol' boy," Blaze whispered now, "if I can get you outa this alive, I promise to save my money, settle down and become respectable. . . . "

Then forty feet of rope snapped through the air. Even as he whirled, flinging up his right arm to ward off the noose, it flipped over his head, jerked tightly around his neck. The man who had thrown it, a sallow-faced waddy from the Staked Plains known as Speedy Bray—threw in his spurs, took in the slack, and pulled Blaze off his boots. Then Bray's bronc jumped stiff-legged across the prairie with Blaze sliding behind, his gun gone, and both hands tightly gripping the rope to prevent death from strangulation.

Bunch Rogan, broadly grinning, galloped to Speedy and halted him.

"Yo're a hombre that shows brains!" Rogan roared. "These other half-wits were all set to kill the long-eared gazabo. I want him alive."

"You can have him," drawled Speedy, "when you dig up that thousand dollars yuh offered.

Rogan laughed, and shook his head. "Jest a manner of speakin', Speedy. You was jest doin' a loyal man's work when you roped him. He had already tried to kill me an' Joe, and knocked me outa makin' a deal with the gal so I could slip these cattle down to the settlers' grass."

Speedy clung to his rope. "What the hell do I care about you an' Joe?" he rasped, his yellow eyes flashing. "I did this fancy rope act to win me a thousand dollars. Yuh pay me. Or I turn this bird loose on the range."

But as Speedy snarled his threat, Mojave Joe slipped up behind, threw a gun on his rider, and cried sharply, "Put up your hands, Speedy!"

CHAPTER THREE

Gunsmoke Signals

CAUGHT thus, Speedy dropped his rope and slowly raised his hands. But his eyes gleamed angrily as he watched Bunch Rogan dismount and walk down the rope to where Blaze lay on the ground.

One of Speedy's mates whispered to another, "Rogan did offer that money. The skunk—"

Rogan stood over Blaze. He was laughing, for he saw that the slide through the brush had ripped off the lean gunman's shirt, scratched his face and choked him almost senseless.

"Git up!" Rogan said harshly. "Git up so I can knock yuh down."

Blaze slowly hoisted himself off the ground, arose on legs that wobbled. He stood there until his sight cleared, and he could mark the grinning red face of Bunch Rogan. And, though he knew he might feel a bullet the next second, Blaze swung his fist for the point of Rogan's chin. And he hit it!

Amazed, Rogan rocked back on his boot-heels. But the blow didn't put him down, for there hadn't been much power back of it. He leaped on Blaze with a yell, battered him down, pounded him even after he was completely out.

Mojave Joe, gun still on Speedy, laughed. But Speedy and his friends were quiet. It was one thing to kill a man in hot battle. It was another to kick

him to death, as though he were a dog.

While punchers took the battered captives to camp, Rogan sent others in pursuit of Sally. His guards blocked the pass, but there was the danger that the daring girl would attempt the perilous trail over the Packsaddle Mountain.

As Rogan stared at the three silent men flung down like sacks of grain in the shade of the wagon, he smiled and rubbed his hands. Then he turned to Mojave Joe.

"We shore hold the high cards in this war. Jim Starling, the settler chief, won't try no fightin' while we got his son prisoner. And if we catch the gal—" Rogan's teeth gleamed—"we can ask for, an' git, anything we want from Jim Starling. That gal is the apple of his eye."

"And yore's," laughed Crone. Then he strode over and kicked Blaze in the ribs. "But these two pilgrims," he went on, "what about them? Nobody—not even Starling—gives a damn fer them."

Rogan said slowly, "You been a good boy, Joe. There's a tall tree with a good limb. Pop their necks."

The cook, wounded arm suspended in a red bandanna sling, said eagerly, "I'll shore pull on one end. That tall hombre ruined my biscuit mixin' wing."

But Speedy Bray and his friends glared in disapproval. Hanging was a raw punishment for a range fight. And Rogan had failed to pay his promised reward. . . .

Toadies of Joe and Rogan brought ropes, fashioned hangman's nooses, laughed as they prepared for a neck-tie party. But as Blaze was boosted to his boots and the hemp slipped around his neck, two excited punchers came into camp. They led a horse on which was packed something wrapped in yellow slickers.

Rogan swung about with a curse. These were men he had sent earlier to block the lower pass.

One man, swinging down, loosed the ropes that held the slicker-covered burden. It slumped to the ground. He flung off the covering, revealed the chalky, staring-eyed face of a man.

"Pat Keenan!" Rogan shouted. "Outside man for the Smoky River Bank. Why— why Pat was due here today with the money for these cattle. Forty thousand in cash!"

THE two punchers nodded. "That's why we come back. We heard some magpies in the timber, rode up an' found Pat. He'd been held up, shot outa the saddle, and his packsaddles cut open."

Rogan turned red with rage. He advanced on Jimmy Starling, gave the boy a brutal kick. "The Smoky River settlers are responsible for this killin' and you'll answer for it!" he raged. "You'll hang with these two pilgrims!" He turned to his men. "Bring a third rope!"

In the excitement, Blaze had leaned against the wagon. His hands were tied behind him. His legs had been freed. But he wasn't in shape to fight. Then, as the Box Four outfit gathered around Pat Keenan's limp body, Blaze heard a harsh whisper behind him.

"Hombre—I'm layin' a sixgun on the brake-block, an' cuttin' yore ropes away! Use yore own jedgment!"

Blaze recognized the voice. This was Speedy's way of avenging himself on Rogan and Crone for backing down on the reward. A keen knife slashed at his lashings while the crew examined the body of Keenan and the bullet-marked saddle on the dead man's horse. Rogan had opened his jackknife and dug a bullet from the saddlefork.

"Bigger than a carbine caliber," he snapped. "Steel-jacketed, too. It may be a clue to the hold-ups. As soon as we hang these buzzards, I'll shore start tearin' up

the range. We'll move them cattle pronto, hit the lower range, and go through the nester grass like a cyclone."

But Joe Crone shook his head and smiled coldly. "You won't move the cattle," he declared, "until you pay for them. No money, no cows."

Rogan roared. "You got to play with me, Crone."

"Yeah. But not for so much money. I'm just the agent, Rogan, for the owners of these critters. They hired me to turn the herd over to you, git the cash, and deliver it to them. Yuh can't blame me for bein' careful. But yore credit's good, Bunch. Give me a check. Then—when we git the cash that was stole—I can tear it up."

Rogan scowled. "I'll think it over," he said finally.

He turned on his heel, stalked toward Blaze, Jimmy, and Suggs, who stood with hands behind their backs and ropes around their necks. A dozen punchers stood behind Rogan.

"Take yore last look at the range," Rogan snarled to his three prisoners.

Jimmy Starling merely tightened his lips, glared defiantly at the cattleman. Suggs sighed and muttered that he'd like a chew of tobacco. But Blaze McCloud winked one gray eye at Rogan, smiled, and drawled. "It's too pretty a country to quit so quick."

As he spoke, his right hand flashed from behind his back, and he lined a six-gun on Rogan.

"Pitch up," Blaze commanded. "Quick—or I'll kill you where you stand!"

The Box Four riders stood like frozen statues. Even Speedy Bray, who had slipped off to rejoin his mates, looked the picture of surprise. Mojave Joe turned toward Blaze McCloud.

Then the cook cursed and snarled, "Bunch—jump outa the way. We'll git him!"

But Blaze said calmly. "The first move any man makes without my order, and I'll kill Rogan." Then, to the cook, he said. "Git yore butcher-knife. You can work yore left wing. Cut the ropes off these men's wrists!"

Rogan croaked hoarsely as the cook stood defiant, "Do what he says!"

AS ROGAN shakily gave the only order that would save his life, Blaze smiled and nodded. "Yo're gettin' sense in yore thick head," he drawled. "Just keep yore eyes on me while the cook's at work. Don't make a move—not one. And tell yore men the same."

Rogan licked his dry lips, whispered in a low voice that could barely be heard by his crew. "Boys—don't make a move. Don't—"

Speedy Bray said, with a straight face, "Boss—how about a thousand bucks if I pull that long-legged waddy off yore back?"

"Speedy, keep yore mouth shut," Blaze snapped, "An' yore paw away from yore gun."

The cook's butcher knife flashed in the sun, as the ropes fell away from Suggs' bony wrists. Suggs rubbed his hands, restored circulation. Sliding around the wagon, he untied three horses.

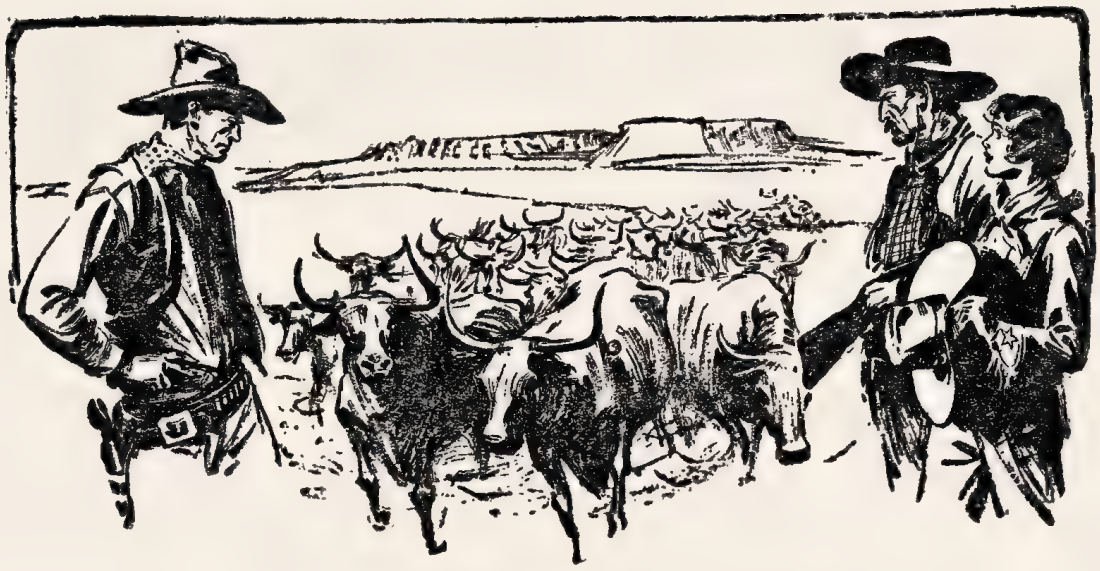
The cook began work on Jimmy's ropes. The boy grinned, and said to Rogan. "I'll pay you back when I git my mitts loose."

But Blaze interrupted. "You'll postpone that, kid. You scoot for a hoss."

But the boy's quick temper flared. "I want a gun first," he declared. "There are plenty around here."

Old Sorrowful yelled. "I got a gun. A fancy rifle. In the scabbard on this hoss. Come along, boy!" Jimmy hitched up his chaps, sauntered around the wagon, stepped up on one of the ponies.

(Continued on page 148)



Up The Trail

IT WAS in the lawyer's office at Clear River, that Steve Raglan made a down-payment from the chinking gold coins of his money-belt—spread them out on the table and let old man Hardwick count them over, while the stranger, littering eyes of the lawyer peered hungrily down. . . .

Steve had been warned that he was buying trouble, grief and death with that hard-won coin. And perhaps it was unlucky that his partner, big good-natured Tex, who had a fondness for poker, likker and his white-handled six-shooter, was not back there with him at that moment.

"It'd be on my conscience if I didn't tell you before you bought," Hardwick said brokenly. "You an' your partner are strangers here, an' I'm takin' away enough bad memories without worryin' about the hell that you're buyin' into. But they—they got me licked—the five Barr brothers an' the gun-hung gents who run at their heels. I can't prove that the Barr brothers have run off my stock and rustled me down to a saddle string—but I know it. I can't prove that they kilt my boy an' brought death to his mother—but it happened. I ain't much with a gun. I'm licked, down inside. Me, I'm quittin' right here an' now!"

Steve Raglan looked away from that lined and bitter face. He wondered, in a moment of uneasiness, if life could ever mark him as old Hardwick was marked. And in paying for that spread of lost hope and accursed memory, he was soon to find out. For even as he signed up, he was to learn that Tex was drunk, sitting in a crooked poker game with one of the Barr killers. But he could not know then that he—Steve—would bring swift and deadly retribution onto himself and his partner, in payment for the deadly blast of his own guns. . . .

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(Continued from page 146)

Suddenly Joe Crone cried harshly. "There's smoke on Packsaddle Mountain."

Even Blaze, caught off guard by the yell, looked toward the blue ridge across the river.

"Signals!" shouted Rogan. "That gal—she's got to the ol' fire lookout. She's sendin' word to her dad, Injun style."

Then, carried on the breeze, came the faraway clatter of gunfire—a burst of sound that died away abruptly.

Joe Crone laughed as the smoke died down. "Bunch—yore men reached the girl in time."

Jimmy Starling yelled. "You hounds! You've killed my sister!" And throwing in his spurs, he jumped his pony around the wagon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Torture Hostage

HEEDLESS in his anger, Jimmy flung his horse across Blaze's front, blocking the lean pilgrim's line of fire. That was all Joe Crone needed. Crouched on his hams, he jerked his gun. He drove a bullet that dropped Jimmy's horse and trapped the rider under the saddle.

Bunch Rogan started to run as Crone's gun roared. But Blaze McCloud, leaping over Jimmy as the kid propped up and attempted to free his foot, snapped a slug that tore through Rogan's right shin. The cattleman flopped on the ground.

Blaze could have killed him, but he had other things to attend to. For with the fall of Jimmy's horse, every man in the Box Four crew had joined in the fight against the lone pilgrim. Some went into it with the earnest intention of killing Blaze. Others were only going through the motions of fighting. Men, for instance, like Speedy Bray.

Speedy, moving awkwardly, managed to stumble against a brother cowpoke as the latter balanced to drive a slug through McCloud's middle shirt button. The bullet went wild and almost downed the cook, as the latter attempted to stab Blaze with his butcher knife.

Joe Crone was sidling to a flank like a crafty coyote, his gaunt body turned toward Blaze to present a narrow target.

A rifle cracked, and old Sorrowful shouted above the blast. "I got yuh marked, Joe."

Crone dropped behind a rock and turned his sixgun on Sorrowful. But the latter, spurring his horse in short circles, held his jumping rifle across the crook of his left arm and pumped high-powered bullets at Joe's shelter.

Blaze noted, as he fired on and brought down a hawk-faced puncher who was slipping off to the right flank, that Jimmy was working his leg free.

Now the cook, after attempting to throw his knife into Blaze, had jumped back to the mess-box and crouched there for shelter. He found the sawed-off shotgun he had used earlier.

Jimmy Starling freed his leg, scrambled up and yelled to Blaze. "Come on!"

"Git over to Sorrowful," barked Blaze. "I'll cover you."

As Jimmy ran toward where Sorrowful was throwing lead, the cook hurled the shotgun, almost knocking the boy off his legs. Blaze, guarding the line of retreat, turned and pitched a slug at close range.

Blinded by the red flash, and creased above his hairy right ear, the cook flopped down on his mess-box table.

"One damned pot wrassler fixed for keeps," Blaze growled savagely.

He whirled past the cook, halted a

(Continued on page 150)

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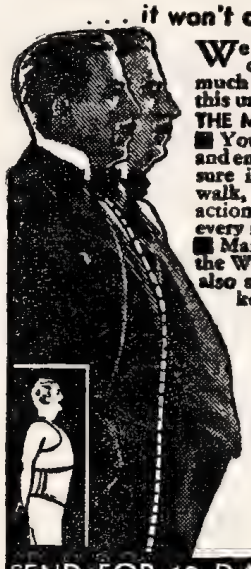

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(Continued from page 149)

moment there to look over the scene. Bullets tore splinters from the wagon box, pelted dust from the tarp cover. But here Blaze found some safety. Sorrowful's rifle was saving him.

Finally, Sorrowful brought his horse around to Jimmy's side.

"Git up here, behind me, you young fool!" he shouted. "We'd been outa this before if yuh hadn't bogged yore locoed head. Git aboard—then we'll worry about Blaze." Reluctantly, Jimmy swung up.

There wasn't another spare horse in camp. Ponies had broken their bridle reins and had bolted across the flat.

BLAZE crouched behind the cook's limp body. Crone lay flat in the dust behind his rock. Rogan had crawled to the cover of a clump of sagebrush. The crew had gone to ground like a flock of grouse. All except Speedy Bray. He had turned and raced to the shallow protection of a buffalo wallow.

Sorrowful slammed another bullet toward Joe Crone, working the lever of the silver-mounted rifle he had discovered in his saddle scabbard, till he had no more cartridges.

Blaze shouted, "Ride for help, Sorrowful! Bring on the settlers!" I can hold off this gang. Ride—you old rattle-head. And for gosh sakes, take that fool kid with yuh!"

Cursing in his whiskers, but aware that he couldn't do much to help his partner, with an empty rifle, Sorrowful flung in his spurs.

Blaze watched the horse depart, grinned through his powder grime, while he flipped his left hand in farewell. He was protected from the fire of the Box Four, until a scout circled the wagon and began throwing lead from the rear.

THE SMOKY RIVER WAR

All depended now on Sorrowful reaching the settlers. Sally had set off the smoke signal, but it was doubtful if she had been given enough time to attract the attention of men far down the valley.

The grin faded from Blaze McCloud's face as he thought of the girl. She hadn't run away. She had risked a steep trail, halted to fire the signal, and thus given Rogan's scouts time to overtake her. And those distant guns. The girl might have attempted a fight, been killed. The game little girl with the yellow curls. . . . Blaze, unaccountably, felt a lump in his throat.

A bullet whined past his head, and his heart turned a flip-flop. That slug had come from the rear! And from a distance!

Horsemen had appeared on a low ridge up the basin from camp. They were riders from the herd, attracted by the rattling gunfire. They had paused to check over the situation, apparently, seen Blaze behind the wagon, and opened up with rifles. These reinforcements put new fight in the Box Four bunch.

"Come on!" Joe Crone shouted. "Jump that pilgrim!"

Blaze whirled from the wagon, headed toward a granite outcropping a few yards away. As he rolled behind it, bullets screamed off the rocks.

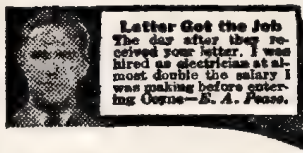
Even Bunch Rogan had forgotten the painful wound in his leg. He staggered up, yelling hoarse orders.

A bullet snapped past him, and he flopped down. That bullet hadn't come from Blaze McCloud's gun. Speedy Bray had bought into the battle on the gray-eyed man's side!

"Somethin' to boot for yore thousand bucks reward!" yelled Speedy. And he tried a second time to drill Bunch Rogan.

Down from the ridge galloped the four punchers who had come from the herd to break up the battle.

(Continued on page 152)



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(Continued from page 151)

As one man reached the brush near the river crossing, he reined back his pony so sharply that the cayuse almost fell. Up the damp trail, men were coming! And in their midst ran a pinto with a slim figure on its back! The scouts had captured Sally, and were bringing her with them.

As the calvalcade neared the camp, a puncher cried.

"We win Rogan's big reward!"

Speedy Bray heard, and laughed. "Like hell," he barked, and kicked up dust alongside Rogan's sprawled form with a third whistling bullet.

MEN crowded around the pinto, careless now of Blaze McCloud's gun. They knew he would not fire for fear that his bullets might strike the girl.

Even Rogan limped over, using the cook's shotgun as a cane. He had wrapped a bandana around his leg. Dust and powdersmoke begrimed his face.

A trace of a cold smile crossed Sally's face as she looked at him. Rogan's rage overcame him. He shook his fist in her face. "All bets is off with you, yuh wildcat. The next time yore dad sees his purty blonde gal, he'll wish she was dead."

Sally laughed. "The next time you see my dad, you'll wish *you* were dead. I'm certain they saw my smoke signal. If so —you can bet good men are splitting the breeze through the pass."

Crone shrugged his narrow shoulders, motioned to the mounted men. "Circle the flat. Bring in all the hosses you can find. We're short on men watchin' the herd. With settlers so damn near, that's a danger spot."

Rogan agreed. "I'll tell you," he went on, "when they git mounted up, start movin' the cattle toward the pass. We'll have em' across before the settlers can make a break."

But Crone smiled and shook his head.

"We don't move cattle into danger—not a hoof—before the Box Four is paid."

"Damn it, man, they robbed me of the cash. They killed Pat Keenan. If you delay now, the whole deal will blow up."

"Yo're a rich man. I'll take chances on a check from you. Then—if the cash shows up—I'll tear up the check. Jest make it out to me as agent for the Box Four. The minute you sign it, my Box Four crew starts two thousand beef hell-bent for the granger grass. An, Rogan, if ary a man tries to stop us—that man will die in his tracks."

Rogan frowned. Then he heard Sally's scornful laugh. Angrily, he limped to the wagon, extracted his checkbook from the wagon box, and handed a pink slip to Crone. Carefully, the latter folded it.

Hoofs boomed on the sod as several saddled horses, which had just been rounded-up, were driven into camp. Punchers mounted and strung out across country to start drifting the cattle down the river. Crone motioned in the riflemen who were watching Blaze McCloud.

"I'll take over this end of the fight," he said. "You boys head for the beef."

In the camp remained Crone, the cook, Bunch Rogan and the girl. Speedy Bray still occupied his buffalo wallow, shouting defiantly that he intended to stay until Rogan paid the reward.

"We'll git you," Joe Crone laughed, "after we settle the hash of this pilgrim an' his girl friend."

With the cook's assistance, he released Sally's wrists and took her off the pinto. She marched to the wagon and stood there silent under the glare of Bunch Rogan.

Joe Crone sauntered around the wagon and called to Blaze. "Well, the game's up, pilgrim, we got the gal. If you don't aim to listen to her scream, you better throw down yore gun."

(Continued on page 154)

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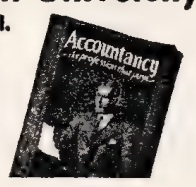

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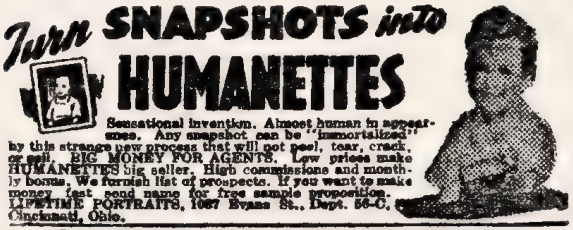

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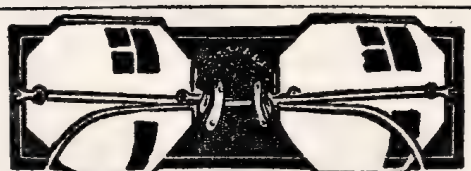

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(Continued from page 153)

CHAPTER FIVE

Captured!

BLAZE lay silent there in the rocks. He couldn't believe that Crone, however cruel, would torture a girl.

Crone waited a moment for an answer, then he called to Bunch. "I suggest," he drawled, "that you uncoil the cook's whip and give the gal a couple licks."

The cook swore. "That whip ain't fitten for such stuff. Not fer beatin' women."

Bunch Rogan laughed. He shouldered the cook aside, reached up and raked the hickory-stocked whip from its socket. Like most ranchmen, he was an expert with a four-horse whip. He limped a few paces from Sally, then the lash writhed out like a snake. She attempted to evade the leather, closed her red lips to stifle a scream. The whip hissed past her.

Rogan laughed harshly. "Jest a teaser," he said. "Next pop I'll kiss yore little ear."

But Blaze McCloud had heard Sally's faint scream of terror. Without a word now, he strode from the rocks with his arms in the air. "Let her go," he barked, gray eyes blazing. "Let her go!"

Crone, holding the reins of Sally's pony, and safely in cover behind the wagon, laughed. "Who said we'd let her go?"

"You promised that if I'd surrender—and I have."

"Which means," taunted Joe, "that we got you both jest where we want you. In a minute—"

Like thunder in the high peaks, a rolling sound cut short Crone's words. He looked toward the ridge, up the valley, over which his men had disappeared.

Blaze also swung, stared toward the rolling pillar of yellow dust that billowed up like smoke. Then—outlined on the

crest—appeared the horned front of a vast stampede....

Sharply above the crash of galloping hoofs, the rattle and clack of horns, rang the hammering of guns. Then, in the haze, appeared the forms of riders, hunched low along their ponies' necks.

"Stampede!" shouted Crone.

"And they're headin' straight for the wagon!" howled the cook.

Crone flung his reins around a wagon wheel, stood up on a spoke, dug into the box for something. Bunch Rogan, his eyes bulging with fear, forgot the girl, stumbled toward the only horse in camp.

The cook rushed to him, flung him aside, reached for a stirrup. Joe Crone swung around. He had tucked a leather pack under his left arm. His gun blazed, and the cook dropped.

Bunch Rogan wobbled toward Crone, fists swinging, cursing and pleading with Crone not to desert him.

"Get outa my way!" shouted Crone.

By main strength, he turned the horse, flung a shoulder against Bunch and knocked the cattleman down. Then with left boot in the stirrup, Crone swung for the saddle while the horse raced away.

Blaze McCloud flung a bullet, but Crone held his seat.

McCloud rushed toward Sally. "Get into the wagon!" he shouted. "It's the only chance!"

As she started up a wheel, using the spokes like rungs in a ladder, Bunch Rogan crawled up on his knees, praying for his life. "My leg's plumb give out," he groaned. "I can't move. Don't let me lay here, for those cattle to run over!"

A GUN flamed in the yellow haze that marked the charging line of the stampede. Speedy Bray had leaped from the wallow as Crone rode past and planted a bullet that had tumbled Joe from leather.

The Box Four man struck the hard

(Continued on page 156)

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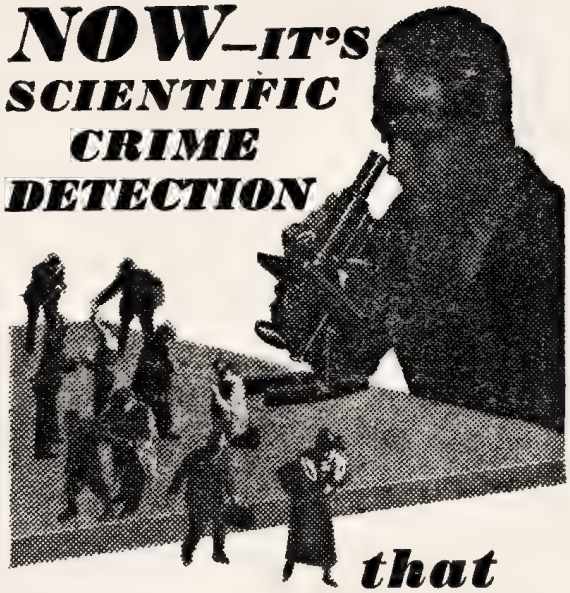

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30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
5.25-17	2.90	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
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Dr. T. J. RASTELLI
London Physician

(Continued from page 155)

ground, bounced, lay quiet. Speedy looked toward the oncoming stampede, estimated the distance between the wallow and safety. Then he scooted toward Joe Crone, seized the leather bag Crone carried on his belt, and headed toward the wagon.

Rogan's clawing hands had clutched one of Sally's boots, but Blaze shoved him away. "Women first," he snapped. "Here's yore last chance, Bunch, to show you got some *man* in yuh."

Blaze flung Sally into the box, put his foot on the lowest spoke to follow. The ground shook with the thunder of longhorn hoofs. The dust rolled high. He could hear faintly the shouts of men who were fighting the wall-eyed cattle.

Like a dull monotone of misery he heard the pleading of Bunch Rogan. "Be a white man! Don't—don't leave me!"

Sally screamed. "Pilgrim—get into the wagon!"

The time was short. But Blaze McCloud cut his chance for life shorter by a split second. He flung his arms around Rogan, added his strength to that of the cattleman, shoved Rogan into the wagon.

As Blaze mounted the wheel, the leading steers reached the wagon. Dust choked him, and his ears roared with sound. He flung one long leg over the edge of the box, felt something clutch on the leg that still trailed behind. Reaching down, he grabbed Speedy by the slack of his shirt, boosted the puncher off the ground as the bellowing, horn-swinging herd closed in.

A big steer jumped the wagon tongue and flung harness high in the air. Ten dogies followed. The tongue cracked with a report like a pistol.

Blaze, leaning from the wagon that tossed like a ship in a gale, emptied his gun into the rolling eyes of cattle. He hoped to clear a space. Speedy, panting heavily, added his iron. Sally was screaming, banging two of the cook's sourdough

pans together. Bunch Rogan shouted hoarsely, waved his arms wildly, hoping to turn the cattle.

"Looks like we'll be here all night!" shouted Blaze.

SALLY heard him, and abruptly checked her noise-making. There, in the wagon that rolled so drunkenly as heavy longhorn bodies crashed against it, she looked through the dust of the big stampede into the gray eyes of Blaze McCloud. Then she extended her hand.

"Pilgrim," she cried, "you are a man!"

Blaze grinned as he gripped that hand, so firm from rope and bridle reins, yet strangely soft to his touch. "And to think," he answered, "that yuh never knew my right name."

Speedy yelled as his gun banged, and a big red steer went down. "Men comin'!"

With roaring guns and flaring yellow slickers, a dozen horsemen slashed and ripped their way toward the wagon. If the main herd had massed there, fifty couldn't have made the ride. But the noisy fight waged from the wagon had diverted the bulk of the cattle.

With those horsemen rode Sorrowful Suggs and Jimmy Starling—and an old man whose grizzled beard was yellow with dust.

"Dad," cried Sally. "You saw my smoke."

"We saw it," groaned Jim Starling, "but we didn't know they had caught you. We slipped up the river and spooked the cattle — started this stampede. God a'-mighty—" his daughter was in his arms —"tuh think we dang drove 'em over my Sally."

They dragged Rogan from the wagon, listened grimly to his story of the murder and robbery.

"Take yore choice," Jim Starling said. "Quit this range within twenty-four hours—or we hang yuh."

(Concluded on page 158)

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(Continued from page 157)

"I'm short eighty thousand dollars," moaned Rogan. "Half in cash, and half in a check that Crone got."

Speedy Bray pointed to a shapeless bundle that lay directly in the path over which the main part of the stampede had passed. "If Joe was packin' a check," said Speedy, "I reckon the stampede plumb punched out all the figgers an' writin'."

Rogan snarled. "Even if I leave this country, there's a law to hear my complaint against you settlers for robbin' and killin' a bank messenger."

But Speedy Bray smiled and waved the leather bundle he had taken off Crone's lifeless body. "Crone turned *that* trick," he declared. "Here's the mazuma."

All stared at him. Even Blaze and Sally. The girl had now slipped to the tall pilgrim's side and into the shelter of his right arm.

"Where's the evidence?" old Starling asked.

"Rogan's packin' a bullet he dug from Keenan's saddle—a bullet from a high-powered rifle."

Speedy Bray pointed toward Sorrowful. "That ol' hellion found the only rifle of that style on Crone's hoss. He's packin' it now."

Blaze interrupted. "Shore—the set-up is plain. Crone killed Keenan this morning. He knew which way and what time Keenan would show up with the money. And he knew he could turn the blame on the settlers. If Rogan hadn't wrote a check, Crone would still have been cattle and money ahead. He shore was smart."

"Not so smart as me," Speedy laughed. "I saved Rogan's cash for one reason. The big moose can pay me that thousand dollars reward before he hoofs it outa this country. Although," Speedy smiled at Blaze, "it looks like somebody else captured you for keeps."

THE END

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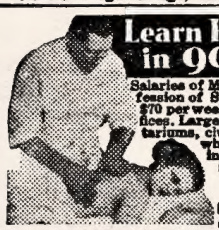

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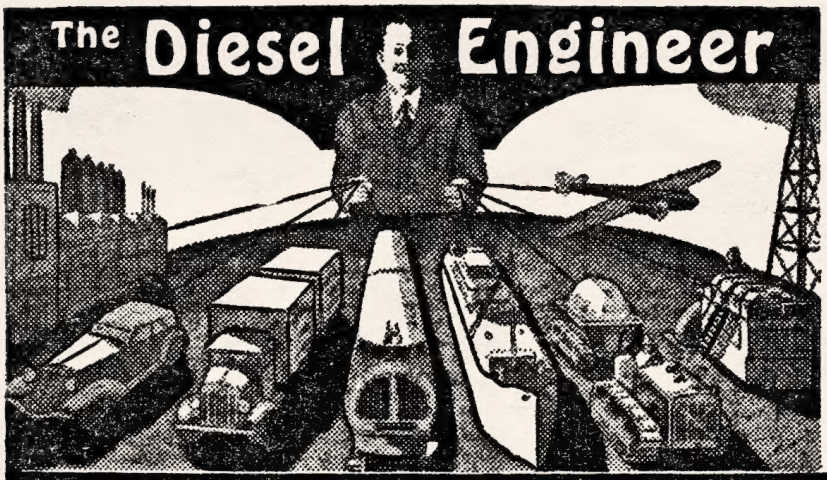

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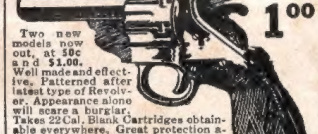

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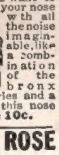

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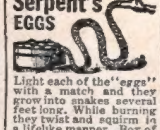

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Big, 3 draw, 6 power telescope for only 25c! Swell for outdoors, nature study, sports, looking at the moon. Converted into Solar telescope by using smoked glass so you can see sun spots, etc. 5" long. Price 25c.

STEAM ENGINE

World's biggest value in mechanical toys. A great big steam engine, 7 in. high by 2½ in. diameter. Watch the flywheel spin around and hear the engine chugging when you get the steam up. Light up, fill the boiler with water, and in a few minutes it is blazing along at top speed! Runs for hours on one filling, and will run small toys off the flywheel. Foolproof, harmless, fully tested and guaranteed to run. Engine is beautifully finished in red and silvers. New model which runs on alcohol or canned heat. **35c. Electric model, 45c, postpaid.**

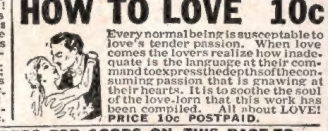
SILENT DEFENDER

Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs and night watchmen as a means of protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand. Useful in an emergency. Aluminum. Wt. 2 oz. Pocket size. **25c, 2 for 45c.**

FUN LICENSES 10c

Large size, nicely printed with seal, suitable for framing. Hand one of these to your friend and he will never forget you! Your choice: Liar's License; Bootleggers Diploma; Marriage Certificate (it looks real); Liar's & grafter's Certificate; Gossiper's Certificate; Spanish Athletes (Bull Throwers) Certificate; Gold Diggers & Grafters Certificate; One Armed Drivers & Neckers Certificate; Kibitzers Certificate. **Only 10c each, 3 for 25c.**

HOW TO LOVE 10c



Every normal being is susceptable to love's tender passion. When love comes the lovers realize how inadequate is the language at their command to express the depths of the consuming passion that is gnawing at their hearts. To soothe the soul of the love-lorn that this work has been compiled. All about LOVE! **PRICE 10c. POSTPAID.**

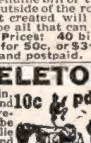
STAGE MONEY

With a bunch of these bills, it is easy for a person of limited means to appear prosperous by flashing a roll of these bills at the proper time and peeling off a genuine bill or two from the outside of the roll. The effect created will be found to be all that can be desired. Prices: 40 bills 20c, 120 for 50c, or $3.50 per thousand postpaid.

LUMINOUS PAINT

LUMINOUS PAINT, when applied to an object, emits rays of white light, rendering it **visible in the dark. The darker the night the brighter it shines.** Simple to use—you can do it! Apply some to the dial of your watch so you can tell time at night. Paint push buttons, switches, anything, everything with it. **Small bottle 25c, Medium Size 50c, Large Size $1.00, postpaid.**

DANCING SKELETON



A jointed figure of a skeleton 14 in. in height, will dance to music and perform various gyrations and movements while the operator may be some distance from it. It will lie down, stand up, dance, etc. We send full and complete instructions. Price **10 cents. 3 for 25 cents postpaid.** 10c pd.

SEX INDICATOR

In Europe this Indicator is used to tell the sex of eggs, dogs, handwriting, etc., etc. We have tried it many times, and although we don't see how it's done, yet we have never seen it fail. Over a man's hand or handwriting, etc. it swings in a straight line. Over a lady's hand, in a circle. Try it yourself. PRICE 10c

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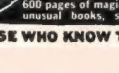

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